

IDEAS

# THE NEW PROPAGANDA WAR

Autocrats in China, Russia, and elsewhere are now making common cause with MAGA Republicans to discredit liberalism and freedom around the world.

By Anne Applebaum

Illustrations by Tyler Comrie

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**O**N JUNE 4, 1989, the Polish Communist Party held partially free elections, setting in motion a series of events that ultimately removed the Communists from power. Not long afterward, street protests calling for free speech, due process, accountability, and democracy brought about the end of the Communist regimes in East Germany, Czechoslovakia, and Romania. Within a few years, the Soviet Union itself would no longer exist.

Also on June 4, 1989, the Chinese Communist Party ordered the military to remove thousands of students from Tiananmen Square. The students were calling for free speech, due process, accountability, and democracy. Soldiers arrested and killed demonstrators in Beijing and around the country. Later, they systematically tracked down the leaders of the protest movement and forced them to confess and recant. Some spent years in jail. Others managed to elude their pursuers and flee the country forever.

In the aftermath of these events, the Chinese concluded that the physical elimination of dissenters was insufficient. To prevent the democratic wave then sweeping across Central Europe from reaching East Asia, the Chinese Communist Party eventually set out to eliminate not just the people but the ideas that had motivated the protests. In the years to come, this would require policing what the Chinese people could see online.

Nobody believed that this would work. In 2000, President Bill Clinton told an audience at the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies that it was impossible. “In the knowledge economy,” he said, “economic innovation and political empowerment, whether anyone likes it or not, will inevitably go hand in hand.” The transcript records the audience reactions:

“Now, there’s no question China has been trying to crack down on the internet.” (*Chuckles.*) “Good luck!” (*Laughter.*) “That’s sort of like

trying to nail Jell-O to the wall.” (*Laughter.*)

While we were still rhapsodizing about the many ways in which the internet could spread democracy, the Chinese were designing what’s become known as the Great Firewall of China. That method of internet management—which is in effect conversation management—contains many different elements, beginning with an elaborate system of blocks and filters that prevent internet users from seeing particular words and phrases. Among them, famously, are *Tiananmen, 1989*, and *June 4*, but there are many more. In 2000, a directive called “Measures for Managing Internet Information Services” prohibited an extraordinarily wide range of content, including anything that “endangers national security, divulges state secrets, subverts the government, undermines national unification,” and “is detrimental to the honor and interests of the state”—anything, in other words, that the authorities didn’t like.

From the May 2022 issue: There is no liberal world order

The Chinese regime also combined online tracking methods with other tools of repression, including security cameras, police inspections, and arrests. In Xinjiang province, where China’s Uyghur Muslim population is concentrated, the state has forced people to install “nanny apps” that can scan phones for forbidden phrases and pick up unusual behavior: Anyone who downloads a virtual private network, anyone who stays offline altogether, and anyone whose home uses too much electricity (which could be evidence of a secret houseguest) can arouse suspicion. Voice-recognition technology and even DNA swabs are used to monitor where Uyghurs walk, drive, and shop. With every new breakthrough, with every AI advance, China has gotten closer to its holy grail: a system that can eliminate not just the words *democracy* and *Tiananmen* from the internet, but the thinking that leads people to become democracy activists or attend public protests in real life.

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But along the way, the Chinese regime discovered a deeper problem: Surveillance, regardless of sophistication, provides no guarantees. During the coronavirus pandemic, the Chinese government imposed controls more severe than most of its citizens had ever experienced. Millions of people were locked into their homes. Untold numbers entered government quarantine camps. Yet the lockdown also produced the angriest and most energetic Chinese protests in many years. Young people who had never attended a demonstration and had no memory of Tiananmen gathered in the streets of Beijing and Shanghai in the autumn of 2022 to talk about freedom. In Xinjiang, where lockdowns were the longest and harshest, and where repression is most complete, people came out in public and sang the Chinese national anthem, emphasizing one line: “Rise up, those who refuse to be slaves!” Clips of their performance circulated widely, presumably because the spyware and filters didn’t identify the national anthem as dissent.

Even in a state where surveillance is almost total, the experience of tyranny and injustice can radicalize people. Anger at arbitrary power will always lead someone to start thinking about another system, a better way to run society. The strength of these demonstrations, and the broader anger they reflected, was enough to spook the Chinese Communist Party into lifting the quarantine and allowing the virus to spread. The deaths that resulted were preferable to public anger and protest.

Like the demonstrations against President Vladimir Putin in Russia that began in 2011, the 2014 street protests in Venezuela, and the 2019 Hong Kong protests, the 2022 protests in China help explain something else: why autocratic regimes have slowly turned their repressive mechanisms outward, into the democratic world. If people are naturally drawn to the image of human rights, to the language of democracy, to the dream of freedom, then those concepts have to be poisoned. That

requires more than surveillance, more than close observation of the population, more than a political system that defends against liberal ideas. It also requires an offensive plan: a narrative that damages both the idea of democracy everywhere in the world and the tools to deliver it.

**O**N FEBRUARY 24, 2022, as Russia launched its invasion of Ukraine, fantastical tales of biological warfare began surging across the internet. Russian officials solemnly declared that secret U.S.-funded biolabs in Ukraine had been conducting experiments with bat viruses and claimed that U.S. officials had confessed to manipulating “dangerous pathogens.” The story was unfounded, not to say ridiculous, and was repeatedly debunked.

Nevertheless, an American Twitter account with links to the QAnon conspiracy network—@WarClandestine—began tweeting about the nonexistent biolabs, racking up thousands of retweets and views. The hashtag #biolab started trending on Twitter and reached more than 9 million views. Even after the account—later revealed to belong to a veteran of the Army National Guard—was suspended, people continued to post screenshots. A version of the story appeared on the Infowars website created by Alex Jones, best known for promoting conspiracy theories about the shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School and harassing families of the victims. Tucker Carlson, then still hosting a show on Fox News, played clips of a Russian general and a Chinese spokesperson repeating the biolab fantasy and demanded that the Biden administration “stop lying and [tell] us what’s going on here.”

Chinese state media also leaned hard into the story. A foreign-ministry spokesperson declared that the U.S. controlled 26 biolabs in Ukraine: “Russia has found during its military operations that the U.S. uses these facilities to conduct bio-military plans.” Xinhua, a Chinese state news agency, ran multiple headlines: “U.S.-Led Biolabs Pose Potential Threats to People of Ukraine and Beyond,” “Russia Urges U.S. to Explain Purpose of Biological Labs in Ukraine,” and so on. U.S. diplomats publicly refuted these fabrications. Nevertheless, the Chinese continued to spread them. So did the scores of Asian, African, and Latin American media outlets that have content-sharing agreements with Chinese state media. So did Telesur, the Venezuelan network; Press

TV, the Iranian network; and Russia Today, in Spanish and Arabic, as well as on many Russia Today–linked websites around the world.

This joint propaganda effort worked. Globally, it helped undermine the U.S.-led effort to create solidarity with Ukraine and enforce sanctions against Russia. Inside the U.S., it helped undermine the Biden administration's effort to consolidate American public opinion in support of providing aid to Ukraine. According to one poll, a quarter of Americans believed the biolabs conspiracy theory to be true. After the invasion, Russia and China—with, again, help from Venezuela, Iran, and far-right Europeans and Americans—successfully created an international echo chamber. Anyone inside this echo chamber heard the biolab conspiracy theory many times, from different sources, each one repeating and building on the others to create the impression of veracity. They also heard false descriptions of Ukrainians as Nazis, along with claims that Ukraine is a puppet state run by the CIA, and that NATO started the war.

Outside this echo chamber, few even know it exists. At a dinner in Munich in February 2023, I found myself seated across from a European diplomat who had just returned from Africa. He had met with some students there and had been shocked to discover how little they knew about the war in Ukraine, and how much of what they did know was wrong. They had repeated the Russian claims that the Ukrainians are Nazis, blamed NATO for the invasion, and generally used the same kind of language that can be heard every night on the Russian evening news. The diplomat was mystified. He grasped for explanations: Maybe the legacy of colonialism explained the spread of these conspiracy theories, or Western neglect of the global South, or the long shadow of the Cold War.



Tyler Comrie

But the story of how Africans—as well as Latin Americans, Asians, and indeed many Europeans and Americans—have come to spout Russian propaganda about Ukraine is not primarily a story of European colonial history, Western policy, or the Cold War. Rather, it involves China’s systematic efforts to buy or influence both popular and elite audiences around the world; carefully curated Russian propaganda campaigns, some open, some clandestine, some amplified by the American and European far right; and other autocracies using their own networks to promote the same language.

To be fair to the European diplomat, the convergence of what had been disparate authoritarian influence projects is still new. Russian information-launders and Chinese propagandists mostly stayed out of the democratic world's politics, except to promote Chinese achievements, Chinese economic success, and Chinese narratives about Tibet or Hong Kong. Their efforts in Africa and Latin America tended to feature dull, unwatchable announcements of investments and state visits. Russian efforts were more aggressive—sometimes in conjunction with the far right or the far left in the democratic world—and aimed to distort debates and elections in the United States, the United Kingdom, Germany, France, and elsewhere. Still, they often seemed unfocused, as if computer hackers were throwing spaghetti at the wall, just to see which crazy story might stick. Venezuela and Iran were fringe players, not real sources of influence.

Slowly, though, these autocracies have come together, not around particular stories, but around a set of ideas, or rather in opposition to a set of ideas. Transparency, for example. And rule of law. And democracy. They have heard language about those ideas—which originate in the democratic world—coming from their own dissidents, and have concluded that they are dangerous to their regimes. Their own rhetoric makes this clear. In 2013, as Chinese President Xi Jinping was beginning his rise to power, an internal Chinese memo, known enigmatically as Document No. 9—or, more formally, as the Communiqué on the Current State of the Ideological Sphere—listed “seven perils” faced by the Chinese Communist Party. “Western constitutional democracy” led the list, followed by “universal human rights,” “media independence,” “judicial independence,” and “civic participation.” The document concluded that “Western forces hostile to China,” together with dissidents inside the country, “are still constantly infiltrating the ideological sphere,” and instructed party leaders to push back against these ideas wherever they found them, especially online, inside China and around the world.

From the December 2021 issue: The bad guys are winning

Since at least 2004, the Russians have been focused on the same convergence of internal and external ideological threats. That was the year Ukrainians staged a

popular revolt, known as the Orange Revolution—the name came from the orange T-shirts and flags of the protesters—against a clumsy attempt to steal a presidential election. The angry intervention of the Ukrainian public into what was meant to have been a carefully orchestrated victory for Viktor Yanukovich, a pro-Russian candidate directly supported by Putin himself, profoundly unnerved the Russians. This was especially the case because a similarly unruly protest movement in Georgia had brought a pro-European politician, Mikheil Saakashvili, to power the year before.

Shaken by those two events, Putin put the bogeyman of “color revolution” at the center of Russian propaganda. Civic protest movements are now always described as color revolutions in Russia, and as the work of outsiders. Popular opposition leaders are always said to be puppets of foreign governments. Anti-corruption and prodemocracy slogans are linked to chaos and instability wherever they are used, whether in Tunisia, Syria, or the United States. In 2011, a year of mass protest against a manipulated election in Russia itself, Putin bitterly described the Orange Revolution as a “well-tested scheme for destabilizing society,” and he accused the Russian opposition of “transferring this practice to Russian soil,” where he feared a similar popular uprising intended to remove him from power.

Putin was wrong—no “scheme” had been “transferred.” Public discontent in Russia simply had no way to express itself except through street protest, and Putin’s opponents had no legal means to remove him from power. Like so many other people around the world, they talked about democracy and human rights because they recognized that these concepts represented their best hope for achieving justice, and freedom from autocratic power. The protests that led to democratic transitions in the Philippines, Taiwan, South Africa, South Korea, and Mexico; the “people’s revolutions” that washed across Central and Eastern Europe in 1989; the Arab Spring in 2011; and, yes, the color revolutions in Ukraine and Georgia—all were begun by those who had suffered injustice at the hands of the state, and who seized on the language of freedom and democracy to propose an alternative.

This is the core problem for autocracies: The Russians, the Chinese, the Iranians, and others all know that the language of transparency, accountability, justice, and

democracy appeals to some of their citizens, as it does to many people who live in dictatorships. Even the most sophisticated surveillance can't wholly suppress it. The very ideas of democracy and freedom must be discredited—especially in the places where they have historically flourished.

**I**N THE 20TH CENTURY, Communist Party propaganda was overwhelming and inspiring, or at least it was meant to be. The future it portrayed was shiny and idealized, a vision of clean factories, abundant produce, and healthy tractor drivers with large muscles and square jaws. The architecture was designed to overpower, the music to intimidate, the public spectacles to awe. In theory, citizens were meant to feel enthusiasm, inspiration, and hope. In practice, this kind of propaganda backfired, because people could compare what they saw on posters and in movies with a far more impoverished reality.

A few autocracies still portray themselves to their citizens as model states. The North Koreans continue to hold colossal military parades with elaborate gymnastics displays and huge portraits of their leader, very much in the Stalinist style. But most modern authoritarians have learned from the mistakes of the previous century. Freedom House, a nonprofit that advocates for democracy around the world, lists 56 countries as “not free.” Most don't offer their fellow citizens a vision of utopia, and don't inspire them to build a better world. Instead, they teach people to be cynical and passive, apathetic and afraid, because there is no better world to build. Their goal is to persuade their own people to stay out of politics, and above all to convince them that there is no democratic alternative: *Our state may be corrupt, but everyone else is corrupt too. You may not like our leader, but the others are worse. You may not like our society, but at least we are strong. The democratic world is weak, degenerate, divided, dying.*

Instead of portraying China as the perfect society, modern Chinese propaganda seeks to inculcate nationalist pride, based on China's real experience of economic development, and to promote a Beijing model of progress through dictatorship and “order” that's superior to the chaos and violence of democracy. Chinese media mocked the laxity of the American response to the pandemic with an animated film that ended with the Statue of Liberty on an intravenous drip. China's *Global Times* wrote

that Chinese people were mocking the January 6 insurrection as “karma” and “retribution”: “Seeing such scenarios,” the publication’s then-editor wrote in an op-ed, “many Chinese will naturally recall that Nancy Pelosi once praised the violence of Hong Kong protesters as ‘a beautiful sight to behold.’” (Pelosi, of course, had praised peaceful demonstrators, not violence.) The Chinese are told that these forces of chaos are out to disrupt their own lives, and they are encouraged to fight against them in a “people’s war” against foreign influence.

Read: I watched Russian TV so you don’t have to

Russians, although they hear very little about what happens in their own towns and cities, receive similar messages about the decline of places they don’t know and have mostly never visited: America, France, Britain, Sweden, Poland—countries apparently filled with degeneracy, hypocrisy, and Russophobia. A study of Russian television from 2014 to 2017 found that negative news about Europe appeared on the three main Russian channels, all state-controlled, an average of 18 times a day. Some of the stories were obviously invented (*European governments are stealing children from straight families and giving them to gay couples!*), but even the true ones were cherry-picked to support the idea that daily life in Europe is frightening and chaotic, that Europeans are weak and immoral, and that the European Union is aggressive and interventionist. If anything, the portrayal of America has been more dramatic. Putin himself has displayed a surprisingly intimate acquaintance with American culture wars about transgender rights, and mockingly sympathized with people who he says have been “canceled.”

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Fear, cynicism, nihilism, and apathy, coupled with disgust and disdain for democracy: This is what modern autocrats sell to their citizens and to foreigners, all with the aim of destroying what they call “American hegemony.”

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The goal is clear: to prevent Russians from identifying with Europe the way they once did, and to build alliances between Putin's domestic audience and his supporters in Europe and North America, where some naive conservatives (or perhaps cynical, well-paid conservatives) seek to convince their followers that Russia is a "white Christian state." In reality, Russia has very low church attendance, legal abortion, and a multiethnic population containing millions of Muslim citizens and migrants. The autonomous region of Chechnya, which is part of the Russian Federation, is governed, in practice, by elements of Sharia law. The Russian state harasses and represses many forms of religion outside the state-sanctioned Russian Orthodox Church, including evangelical Protestantism. Nevertheless, among the slogans shouted by white nationalists marching in the infamous Charlottesville, Virginia, demonstration in 2017 was "Russia is our friend." Putin sends periodic messages to this constituency: "I uphold the traditional approach that a woman is a woman, a man is a man, a mother is a mother, and a father is a father," he told a press conference in December 2021, almost as if this "traditional approach" would be justification for invading Ukraine.

Michael Carpenter: Russia is co-opting angry young men

This manipulation of the strong emotions around gay rights and feminism has been widely copied throughout the autocratic world, often as a means of defending against criticism of the regime. Yoweri Museveni, who has been the president of Uganda for more than three decades, passed an "anti-homosexuality" bill in 2014, instituting a life sentence for gay people who have sex or marry and criminalizing the "promotion" of a homosexual lifestyle. By picking a fight over gay rights, he was able to consolidate his supporters at home while neutralizing foreign criticisms of his regime, describing them as "social imperialism": "Outsiders cannot dictate to us; this is our country," he declared. Viktor Orbán, the prime minister of Hungary, also ducks discussion of Hungarian corruption by hiding behind a culture war. He pretends that ongoing tension between his government and the U.S. ambassador to Hungary concerns religion and gender: During Tucker Carlson's recent visit to Hungary, Carlson

declared that the Biden administration “hates” Hungary because “it’s a Christian country,” when in fact it is Orbán’s deep financial and political ties to Russia and China that have badly damaged American-Hungarian relations.

The new authoritarians also have a different attitude toward reality. When Soviet leaders lied, they tried to make their falsehoods seem real. They became angry when anyone accused them of lying. But in Putin’s Russia, Bashar al-Assad’s Syria, and Nicolás Maduro’s Venezuela, politicians and television personalities play a different game. They lie constantly, blatantly, obviously. But they don’t bother to offer counterarguments when their lies are exposed. After Russian-controlled forces shot down Malaysia Airlines Flight MH17 over Ukraine in 2014, the Russian government reacted not only with a denial, but with multiple stories, plausible and implausible: It blamed the Ukrainian army, and the CIA, and a nefarious plot in which dead people were placed on a plane in order to fake a crash and discredit Russia. This tactic—the so-called fire hose of falsehoods—ultimately produces not outrage but nihilism. Given so many explanations, how can you know what actually happened? What if you just can’t know? If you don’t know what happened, you’re not likely to join a great movement for democracy, or to listen when anyone speaks about positive political change. Instead, you are not going to participate in any politics at all.

Anne Applebaum: The American face of authoritarian propaganda

Fear, cynicism, nihilism, and apathy, coupled with disgust and disdain for democracy: This is the formula that modern autocrats, with some variations, sell to their citizens and to foreigners, all with the aim of destroying what they call “American hegemony.” In service of this idea, Russia, a colonial power, paints itself as a leader of the non-Western civilizations in what the analyst Ivan Klyszcz calls their struggle for “messianic multipolarity,” a battle against “the West’s imposition of ‘decadent,’ ‘globalist’ values.” In September 2022, when Putin held a ceremony to mark his illegal annexation of southern and eastern Ukraine, he claimed that he was protecting Russia from the “satanic” West and “perversions that lead to degradation and extinction.” He did not speak of the people he had tortured or the Ukrainian children he had kidnapped. A year later, Putin told a gathering in Sochi: “We are now fighting not just

for Russia's freedom but for the freedom of the whole world. We can frankly say that the dictatorship of one hegemon is becoming decrepit. We see it, and everyone sees it now. It is getting out of control and is simply dangerous for others." The language of "hegemony" and "multipolarity" is now part of Chinese, Iranian, and Venezuelan narratives too.

In truth, Russia is a genuine danger to its neighbors, which is why most of them are re-arming and preparing to fight against a new colonial occupation. The irony is even greater in African countries like Mali, where Russian mercenaries from the Wagner Group have helped keep a military dictatorship in power, reportedly by conducting summary executions, committing atrocities against civilians, and looting property. In Mali, as in Ukraine, the battle against Western decadence means that white Russian thugs brutally terrorize people with impunity.

And yet Mali Actu, a pro-Russian website in Mali, solemnly explains to its readers that "in a world that is more and more multipolar, Africa will play a more and more important role." Mali Actu is not alone; it's just a small part of a propaganda network, created by the autocracies, that is now visible all over the world.

**T**HE INFRASTRUCTURE of antidemocratic propaganda takes many forms, some overt and some covert, some aimed at the public and some aimed at elites. The United Front, the fulcrum of the Chinese Communist Party's most important influence strategy, seeks to shape perceptions of China around the world by creating educational and exchange programs, controlling Chinese exile communities, building Chinese chambers of commerce, and courting anyone willing to be a de facto spokesperson for China. The Confucius Institutes are probably the best-known elite Chinese influence project. Originally perceived as benign cultural bodies not unlike the Goethe-Institut, run by the German government, and the Alliance Française, they were welcomed by many universities because they provided cheap or even free Chinese-language classes and professors. Over time, the institutes aroused suspicion, policing Chinese students at American universities by restricting open discussions of Tibet and Taiwan, and in some cases altering the teaching of Chinese history and politics to suit Chinese narratives. They have now been mostly disbanded in the United States. But they are flourishing in many other places, including Africa, where there are several dozen.

These subtler operations are augmented by China's enormous investment in international media. The Xinhua wire service, the China Global Television Network, China Radio International, and *China Daily* all receive significant state financing, have social-media accounts in multiple languages and regions, and sell, share, or otherwise promote their content. These Chinese outlets cover the entire world, and provide feeds of slickly produced news and video segments to their partners at low prices, sometimes for free, which makes them more than competitive with reputable Western newswires, such as Reuters and the Associated Press. Scores of news organizations in Europe and Asia use Chinese content, as do many in Africa, from Kenya and Nigeria to Egypt and Zambia. Chinese media maintain a regional hub in Nairobi, where they hire prominent local journalists and produce content in African languages. Building this media empire has been estimated to cost billions of dollars a year.



Tyler Comrie

For the moment, viewership of many of these Chinese-owned channels remains low; their output can be predictable, even boring. But more popular forms of Chinese television are gradually becoming available. StarTimes, a satellite-television company that is tightly linked to the Chinese government, launched in Africa in 2008 and now has 13 million television subscribers in more than 30 African countries. StarTimes is cheap for consumers, costing just a few dollars a month. It prioritizes Chinese content—not just news but kung-fu movies, soap operas, and Chinese Super League football, with the dialogue and commentary all translated into Hausa, Swahili, and other African languages. In this way, even entertainment can carry China-positive messages.

This subtler shift is the real goal: to have the Chinese point of view appear in the local press, with local bylines. Chinese propagandists call this strategy “borrowing boats to reach the sea,” and it can be achieved in many ways. Unlike Western governments, China doesn’t think of propaganda, censorship, diplomacy, and media as separate activities. Legal pressure on news organizations, online trolling operations aimed at journalists, cyberattacks—all of these can be deployed as part of a single operation

designed to promulgate or undermine a given narrative. China also offers training courses or stipends for local journalists across Asia, Africa, and Latin America, sometimes providing phones and laptops in exchange for what the regime hopes will be favorable coverage.

The Chinese also cooperate, both openly and discreetly, with the media outlets of other autocracies. Telesur, a Hugo Chávez project launched in 2005, is headquartered in Caracas and led by Venezuela in partnership with Cuba and Nicaragua. Selectively culled bits of foreign news make it onto Telesur from its partners, including headlines that presumably have limited appeal in Latin America: “US-Armenia Joint Military Drills Undermine Regional Stability,” for example, and “Russia Has No Expansionist Plans in Europe.” Both of these stories, from 2023, were lifted directly from the Xinhua wire.

Iran, for its part, offers HispanTV, the Spanish-language version of Press TV, the Iranian international service. HispanTV leans heavily into open anti-Semitism and Holocaust denial: One March 2020 headline declared that the “New Coronavirus Is the Result of a Zionist Plot.” Spain banned HispanTV and Google blocked it from its YouTube and Gmail accounts, but the service is easily available across Latin America, just as Al-Alam, the Arabic version of Press TV, is widely available in the Middle East. After the October 7 Hamas attack on Israel, the Institute for Strategic Dialogue, an international group dedicated to fighting disinformation, found that Iran was creating additional hacking groups to target digital, physical, and electoral infrastructure in Israel (where it went after electoral rolls) and the United States. In the future, these hacking operations may be combined with propaganda campaigns.

RT—Russia Today—has a bigger profile than either Telesur or Press TV; in Africa, it has close links to China. Following the invasion of Ukraine, some satellite networks dropped RT. But China’s StarTimes satellite picked it up, and RT immediately began building offices and relationships across Africa, especially in countries run by autocrats who echo its anti-Western, anti-LGBTQ messages, and who appreciate its lack of critical or investigative reporting.

RT—like Press TV, Telesur, and even CGTN—also functions as a production facility, a source of video clips that can be spread online, repurposed and reused in targeted campaigns. Americans got a firsthand view of how the clandestine versions work in 2016, when the Internet Research Agency—now disbanded but based then in St. Petersburg and led by the late Yevgeny Prigozhin, more famous as the mercenary boss of the Wagner Group who staged an aborted march on Moscow—pumped out fake material via fake Facebook and Twitter accounts, designed to confuse American voters. Examples ranged from virulently anti-immigration accounts aimed at benefiting Donald Trump to fake Black Lives Matter accounts that attacked Hillary Clinton from the left.

Since 2016, these tactics have been applied across the globe. The Xinhua and RT offices in Africa and around the world—along with Telesur and HispanTV—create stories, slogans, memes, and narratives promoting the worldview of the autocracies; these, in turn, are repeated and amplified in many countries, translated into many languages, and reshaped for many local markets. The material produced is mostly unsophisticated, but it is inexpensive and can change quickly, according to the needs of the moment. After the October 7 Hamas attack, for example, official and unofficial Russian sources immediately began putting out both anti-Israel and anti-Semitic material, and messages calling American and Western support for Ukraine hypocritical in light of the Gaza conflict. The data-analytics company Alto Intelligence found posts smearing both Ukrainians and Israelis as “Nazis,” part of what appears to be a campaign to bring far-left and far-right communities closer together in opposition to U.S.-allied democracies. Anti-Semitic and pro-Hamas messages also increased inside China, as well as on Chinese-linked accounts around the world. Joshua Eisenman, a professor at Notre Dame and the author of a new book on China’s relations with Africa, told me that during a recent trip to Beijing, he was astonished by how quickly the previous Chinese line on the Middle East—“China-Israel relations are stronger than ever”—changed. “It was a complete 180 in just a few days.”

Not that everyone hearing these messages will necessarily know where they come from, because they often appear in forums that conceal their origins. Most people

probably did not hear the American-biolabs conspiracy theory on a television news program, for example. Instead, they heard it thanks to organizations like Pressenza and Yala News. Pressenza, a website founded in Milan and relocated to Ecuador in 2014, publishes in eight languages, describes itself as “an international news agency dedicated to news about peace and nonviolence,” and featured an article on biolabs in Ukraine. According to the U.S. State Department, Pressenza is part of a project, run by three Russian companies, that planned to create articles in Moscow and then translate them for these “native” sites, following Chinese practice, to make them seem “local.” Pressenza denied the allegations; one of its journalists, Oleg Yasinsky, who says he is of Ukrainian origin, responded by denouncing America’s “planetary propaganda machine” and quoting Che Guevara.

Like Pressenza, Yala News also markets itself as independent. This U.K.-registered, Arabic-language news operation provides slickly produced videos, including celebrity interviews, to its 3 million followers every day. In March 2022, as the biolabs allegation was being promoted by other outlets, the site posted a video that echoed one of the most sensational versions: Ukraine was planning to use migratory birds as a delivery vehicle for bioweapons, infecting the birds and then sending them into Russia to spread disease.

Yala did not invent this ludicrous tale: Russian state media, such as the Sputnik news agency, published it in Russian first, followed by Sputnik’s Arabic website and RT Arabic. Russia’s United Nations ambassador addressed the UN Security Council about the biobird scandal, warning of the “real biological danger to the people in European countries, which can result from an uncontrolled spread of bioagents from Ukraine.” In an April 2022 interview in Kyiv, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky told *The Atlantic*’s editor in chief, Jeffrey Goldberg, and me that the biobirds story reminded him of a Monty Python sketch. If Yala were truly an “independent” publication, as it describes itself, it would have fact-checked this story, which, like the other biolab conspiracies, was widely debunked.

Read: Anne Applebaum and Jeffrey Goldberg interview Volodymyr Zelensky

But Yala News is not a news organization at all. As the BBC has reported, it's an information laundromat, a site that exists to spread and propagate material produced by RT and other Russian facilities. Yala News has posted claims that the Russian massacre of Ukrainian civilians at Bucha was staged, that Zelensky appeared drunk on television, and that Ukrainian soldiers were running away from the front lines. Although the company is registered to an address in London—a mail drop shared by 65,000 other companies—its “news team” is based in a suburb of Damascus. The company's CEO is a Syrian businessman based in Dubai who, when asked by the BBC, insisted on the organization's “impartiality.”

Another strange actor in this field is RRN—the company's name is an acronym, originally for Reliable Russian News, later changed to Reliable Recent News. Created in the aftermath of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, RRN, part of a bigger information-laundering operation known to investigators as Doppelganger, is primarily a “typosquatter”: a company that registers domain names that look similar to real media domain names—Reuters.cfd instead of Reuters.com, for example—as well as websites with names that sound authentic (like *Notre Pays*, or “Our Country”) but are created to deceive. RRN is prolific. During its short existence, it has created more than 300 sites targeting Europe, the Middle East, and Latin America. Links to these sites are then used to make Facebook, Twitter, and other social-media posts appear credible. When someone is quickly scrolling, they might not notice that a headline links to a fake Spiegel.pro website, say, rather than to the authentic German-magazine website Spiegel.de.

Doppelganger's efforts, run by a clutch of companies in Russia, have varied widely, and seem to have included fake NATO press releases, with the same fonts and design as the genuine releases, “revealing” that NATO leaders were planning to deploy Ukrainian paramilitary troops to France to quell pension protests. In November, operatives who the French government believes are linked to Doppelganger spray-painted Stars of David around Paris and posted them on social media, hoping to amplify French divisions over the Gaza war. Russian operatives built a social-media network to spread the false stories and the photographs of anti-Semitic graffiti. The

goal is to make sure that the people encountering this content have little clue as to who created it, or where or why.

Russia and China are not the only parties in this space. Both real and automated social-media accounts geolocated to Venezuela played a small role in the 2018 Mexican presidential election, for example, boosting the campaign of Andrés Manuel López Obrador. Notable were two kinds of messages: those that promoted images of Mexican violence and chaos—images that might make people feel they need an autocrat to restore order—and those that were angrily opposed to NAFTA and the U.S. more broadly. This tiny social-media investment must have been deemed successful. After he became president, López Obrador engaged in the same kinds of smear campaigns as unelected politicians in autocracies, empowered and corrupted the military, undermined the independence of the judiciary, and otherwise degraded Mexican democracy. In office, he has promoted Russian narratives about the war in Ukraine along with Chinese narratives about the repression of the Uyghurs. Mexico's relationship with the United States has become more difficult—and that, surely, was part of the point.

None of these efforts would succeed without local actors who share the autocratic world's goals. Russia, China, and Venezuela did not invent anti-Americanism in Mexico. They did not invent Catalan separatism, to name another movement that both Russian and Venezuelan social-media accounts supported, or the German far right, or France's Marine Le Pen. All they do is amplify existing people and movements—whether anti-LGBTQ, anti-Semitic, anti-Muslim, anti-immigrant, anti-Ukrainian, or, above all, antidemocratic. Sometimes they provide a social-media echo. Sometimes they employ reporters and spokespeople. Sometimes they use the media networks they built for this purpose. And sometimes, they just rely on Americans to do it for them.

**H**ERE IS A DIFFICULT TRUTH: A part of the American political spectrum is not merely a passive recipient of the combined authoritarian narratives that come from Russia, China, and their ilk, but an active participant in creating and spreading them. Like the leaders of those countries, the American MAGA right also wants Americans to believe that their democracy is degenerate, their elections illegitimate, their civilization dying. The MAGA movement's leaders also have an interest in pumping nihilism and cynicism into the brains of their fellow citizens, and in convincing them that nothing they see is true. Their goals are so similar that it is hard to distinguish between the online American alt-right and its foreign amplifiers, who have multiplied since the days when this was solely a Russian project. Tucker Carlson has even promoted the fear of a color revolution in America, lifting the phrase directly from Russian propaganda. The Chinese have joined in too: Earlier this year, a group of Chinese accounts that had previously been posting pro-Chinese material in Mandarin began posting in English, using MAGA symbols and attacking President Joe Biden. They showed fake images of Biden in prison garb, made fun of his age, and called him a satanist pedophile. One Chinese-linked account reposted an RT video repeating the lie that Biden had sent a neo-Nazi criminal to fight in Ukraine. Alex Jones's reposting of the lie on social media reached some 400,000 people.

Given that both Russian and Chinese actors now blend in so easily with the MAGA messaging operation, it is hardly surprising that the American government has difficulty responding to the newly interlinked autocratic propaganda network. American-government-backed foreign broadcasters—Voice of America, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, Radio Farda, Radio Martí—still exist, but neither their mandate nor their funding has changed much in recent years. The intelligence agencies continue to observe what happens—there is a Foreign Malign Influence Center under the Office of the Director of National Intelligence—but they are by definition not part of the public debate. The only relatively new government institution fighting antidemocratic propaganda is the Global Engagement Center, but it is in the State Department, and its mandate is to focus on authoritarian propaganda outside the United States. Established in 2016, it replaced the Center for Strategic Counterterrorism Communications, which sought to foil the Islamic State and other

jihadist groups that were recruiting young people online. In 2014–15, as the scale of Russian disinformation campaigns in Europe was becoming better known, Congress designated the GEC to deal with Russian as well as Chinese, Iranian, and other propaganda campaigns around the world—although not, again, inside the United States. Throughout the Trump administration, the organization languished under the direction of a president who himself repeated Russian propaganda lines during the 2016 campaign—“Obama founded ISIS,” for example, and “Hillary will start World War III.”

Today the GEC is run by James Rubin, a former State Department spokesperson from the Bill Clinton era. It employs 125 people and has a budget of \$61 million—hardly a match for the many billions that China and Russia spend building their media networks. But it is beginning to find its footing, handing out small grants to international groups that track and reveal foreign disinformation operations. It’s now specializing in identifying covert propaganda campaigns before they begin, with the help of U.S. intelligence agencies. Rubin calls this “prebunking” and describes it as a kind of “inoculation”: “If journalists and governments know that this is coming, then when it comes, they will recognize it.”

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“Lo and behold, the entity that becomes the most persistent in alleging that American elections are fraudulent, fake, rigged, and everything else turns out to be the president of the United States.”

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The revelation in November of the Russian ties to seemingly native left-wing websites in Latin America, including *Pressenza*, was one such effort. More recently, the GEC published a report on the African Initiative, an agency that had planned a huge campaign to discredit Western health philanthropy, starting with rumors about a new

virus supposedly spread by mosquitoes. The idea was to smear Western doctors, clinics, and philanthropists, and to build a climate of distrust around Western medicine, much as Russian efforts helped build a climate of distrust around Western vaccines during the pandemic. The GEC identified the Russian leader of the project, Artem Sergeyevich Kureyev; noted that several employees had come to the African Initiative from the Wagner Group; and located two of its offices, in Mali and Burkina Faso. Rubin and others subsequently spent a lot of time talking with regional reporters about the African Initiative's plans so that "people will recognize them" when they launch. Dozens of articles in English, Spanish, and other languages have described these operations, as have thousands of social-media posts. Eventually, the goal is to create an alliance of other nations who also want to share information about planned and ongoing information operations so that everyone knows they are coming.

It's a great idea, but no equivalent agency functions inside the United States. Some social-media companies have made purely voluntary efforts to remove foreign-government propaganda, sometimes after being tipped off by the U.S. government but mostly on their own. In the U.S., Facebook created a security-policy unit that still regularly announces when it discovers "coordinated inauthentic behavior"—meaning accounts that are automated and/or evidently part of a planned operation from (usually) Russian, Iranian, or Chinese sources—and then takes down the posts. It is difficult for outsiders to monitor this activity, because the company restricts access to its data, and even controls the tools that can be used to examine the data. In March, Meta announced that by August, it would phase out CrowdTangle, a tool used to analyze Facebook data, and replace it with a tool that analysts fear will be harder to use.

X (formerly Twitter) also used to look for foreign propaganda activity, but under the ownership of Elon Musk, that voluntary effort has been badly weakened. The new blue-check "verification" process allows users—including anonymous, pro-Russian users—to pay to have their posts amplified; the old "safety team" no longer exists. The result: After the collapse of the Kakhovka dam in Ukraine last summer, a major environmental and humanitarian disaster caused by Russian bombing over many

weeks, the false narrative that Ukraine had destroyed it appeared hundreds of thousands of times on X. After the ISIS terrorist attack on a concert hall in Moscow in March, David Sacks, the former PayPal entrepreneur and a close associate of Musk's, posted on X, with no evidence, that "if the Ukrainian government was behind the terrorist attack, as looks increasingly likely, the U.S. must renounce it." His completely unfounded post was viewed 2.5 million times. This spring, some Republican congressional leaders finally began speaking about the Russian propaganda that had "infected" their base and their colleagues. Most of that "Russian propaganda" is not coming from inside Russia.

Over the past several years, universities and think tanks have used their own data analytics to try to identify inauthentic networks on the largest websites—but they are also now meeting resistance from MAGA-affiliated Republican politicians. In 2020, teams at Stanford University and the University of Washington, together with the Digital Forensic Research Lab at the Atlantic Council and Graphika, a company that specializes in social-media analytics, decided to join forces to monitor false election information. Renée DiResta, one of the leaders of what became the Election Integrity Partnership, told me that an early concern was Russian and Chinese campaigns. DiResta assumed that these foreign interventions wouldn't matter much, but she thought it would be useful and academically interesting to understand their scope. "Lo and behold," she said, "the entity that becomes the most persistent in alleging that American elections are fraudulent, fake, rigged, and everything else turns out to be the president of the United States." The Election Integrity Partnership tracked election rumors coming from across the political spectrum, but observed that the MAGA right was far more prolific and significant than any other source.

The Election Integrity Partnership was not organized or directed by the U.S. government. It occasionally reached out to platforms, but had no power to compel them to act, DiResta told me. Nevertheless, the project became the focus of a complicated MAGA-world conspiracy theory about alleged government suppression of free speech, and it led to legal and personal attacks on many of those involved. The project has been smeared and mischaracterized by some of the journalists attached to Musk's "Twitter Files" investigation, and by Representative Jim Jordan's Select

Subcommittee on the Weaponization of the Federal Government. A series of lawsuits alleging that the U.S. government sought to suppress conservative speech, including one launched by Missouri and Louisiana that has now reached the Supreme Court, has effectively tried to silence organizations that investigate both domestic and foreign disinformation campaigns, overt and covert. To state baldly what is happening: The Republican Party's right wing is actively harassing legitimate, good-faith efforts to track the production and dissemination of autocratic disinformation here in the United States.

Over time, the attack on the Election Integrity Partnership has itself acquired some of the characteristics of a classic information-laundering operation. The most notorious example concerns a reference, on page 183 of the project's final post-2020-election report, to the 21,897,364 tweets gathered *after* the election, in an effort to catalog the most viral false rumors. That simple statement of the size of the database has been twisted into another false and yet constantly repeated rumor: the spurious claim that the Department of Homeland Security somehow conspired with the Election Integrity Partnership to censor 22 million tweets. This never happened, and yet DiResta said that "this nonsense about the 22 million tweets pops up constantly as evidence of the sheer volume of our duplicity"; it has even appeared in the *Congressional Record*.

The same tactics have been used against the Global Engagement Center. In 2021, the GEC gave a grant to another organization, the Global Disinformation Index, which helped develop a technical tool to track online campaigns in East Asia and Europe. For a completely unrelated, separately funded project, the Global Disinformation Index also conducted a study, aimed at advertisers, that identified websites at risk for publishing false stories. Two conservative organizations, finding their names on that latter list, sued the GEC, although it had nothing to do with creating the list. Musk posted, again without any evidence, "The worst offender in US government censorship & media manipulation is an obscure agency called GEC," and that organization also became caught up in the endless whirlwind of conspiracy and congressional investigations.

As it happens, I was caught up in it too, because I was listed online as an “adviser” to the Global Disinformation Index, even though I had not spoken with anyone at the organization for several years and was not aware that it even had a website. A predictable, and wearisome, pattern followed: false accusations (no, I was not advising anyone to censor anyone) and the obligatory death threats. Of course, my experience was mild compared with the experience of DiResta, who has been accused of being, as she put it, “the head of a censorship-industrial complex that does not exist.”

These stories are symptomatic of a larger problem: Because the American extreme right and (more rarely) the extreme left benefit from the spread of antidemocratic narratives, they have an interest in silencing or hobbling any group that wants to stop, or even identify, foreign campaigns. Senator Mark Warner, the chair of the Senate Intelligence Committee, told me that “we are actually less prepared today than we were four years ago” for foreign attempts to influence the 2024 election. This is not only because authoritarian propaganda campaigns have become more sophisticated as they begin to use AI, or because “you obviously have a political environment here where there’s a lot more Americans who are more distrustful of all institutions.” It’s also because the lawsuits, threats, and smear tactics have chilled government, academic, and tech-company responses.

One could call this a secret authoritarian “plot” to preserve the ability to spread antidemocratic conspiracy theories, except that it’s not a secret. It’s all visible, right on the surface. Russia, China, and sometimes other state actors—Venezuela, Iran, Hungary—work with Americans to discredit democracy, to undermine the credibility of democratic leaders, to mock the rule of law. They do so with the goal of electing Trump, whose second presidency would damage the image of democracy around the world, as well as the stability of democracy in America, even further.

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# Autocracy, Inc.: The Dictators Who Want To Run The World

By Anne Applebaum

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**Anne Applebaum**

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Anne Applebaum is a staff writer at *The Atlantic*.

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