

Tomasz W. Grabowski  
Jan Dlugosz University in Czestochowa  
<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1280-1609>  
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# Sharp power

## Summary

**DEFINITION OF THE TERM:** Sharp power is a concept in political science and international relations that describes a form of influence exerted by authoritarian states over democratic ones through the aggressive and sophisticated use of informational tactics (such as disinformation, manipulation, propaganda, etc.). The goal of sharp power is to undermine the political system of the target state, mislead and divide its public opinion, and obscure or deflect attention from negative information about the authoritarian state itself.

**HISTORICAL ANALYSIS OF THE TERM:** The term 'sharp power' was introduced in a 2017 publication by the National Endowment for Democracy in the United States. It contributes to contemporary debates on the nature of power in international relations and complements earlier conceptualisations such as hard power, soft power, smart power, and normative power.

**DISCUSSION OF THE TERM:** Today, sharp power is especially effective and dangerous when deployed by large authoritarian states that adopt a confrontational stance toward the West, most notably Russia and China.

**SYSTEMATIC REFLECTION WITH CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS:** The aggressive use of information as a strategic weapon represents a serious and evolving threat that demands a twofold response from democratic states: preparation (through building societal resilience to informational attacks) and mitigation (via counter-narratives and the

restriction of particularly harmful content). This challenge also calls for deeper reflection on the internal condition of modern democracies, which have proven especially susceptible to informational attacks.

**Keywords:** sharp power, power, Russia, China, disinformation

## Definition of the term

In the field of international relations, the English term *power* is a polysemous concept, the interpretation of which should be situated within the context of cognate terms such as *might*, *force*, *influence*, *energy*, and *authority*.

These meanings can be further clarified as follows:

1. 'Might' refers to a state's capacity and scope for exercising authority over its territory or the environment in which it operates.
2. 'Force' denotes the ability to actually and effectively employ might.
3. 'Influence' is the ability to achieve a desired effect, including control over other states.
4. 'Energy' indicates the capacity to activate or mobilise might.
5. 'Authority' pertains to the decision-making power of those directing a state's policy (Łoś, 2018).

In studies grounded in Robert Dahl's seminal 1957 article, three fundamental aspects of power are distinguished:

1. The ability to persuade others to do what they would not otherwise do – that is, to induce them to act against their initial preferences or strategies.
2. The ability to act in a way that renders the preferences of others irrelevant or illegitimate.
3. The ability to shape the initial preferences of others.

These three aspects of power can be exercised through 'hard' means, based on coercion and imposition, or 'soft' means, based on persuasion and attraction. A more concise definition is offered by John G. Stoessinger, who described power in international relations as "the capacity of a nation to use its tangible and intangible resources in such a way as to affect the behaviour of other nations" (Stoessinger, 1990, pp. 24–25).

One of the most influential contemporary contributions to the concept of power comes from Joseph S. Nye, who popularised the distinction between hard power and soft power. He defined power as "the ability to influence the behaviour of others to get the outcomes one wants" (Nye, 2004, p. 2). This can be achieved through coercion, inducement, or attraction (Nye, 2004).

Hard power is the ability to compel others to do what they otherwise would not through threats or rewards. It relies on coercion and inducement, with military and economic strength playing a central role. Soft power, by contrast, is the ability to attract others so that they want what the power-holder wants. It lies in the capacity to shape others' preferences. A country's soft power is based on three key resources: 1) national culture (both high and popular), which must be seen as attractive by others; 2) political values, which the state must uphold in both domestic and foreign policy; 3) foreign policy, which should be viewed as legitimate and supported by moral authority. The use of soft power is typical of democratic states operating in relatively friendly environments, where combining inducement and attraction is more feasible than in authoritarian states, which, by contrast, tend to rely primarily on coercion (Nye, 2004).

Nye consistently refined the concept of soft power from the outset, optimising it for effective use in shaping U.S. foreign policy. This effort led to the development of smart power, which involves the skilful combination of both hard and soft elements, using coercion, inducement, and attraction simultaneously by drawing on military strength and cultural and economic appeal (Nye, 2011).

Nye began developing the idea of soft power in 1990, publishing his seminal work on the topic in 2004. His most comprehensive discussion of smart power appeared in 2011. During this time, sweeping technological transformations reshaped social life, and significant and often violent geopolitical changes occurred. As a result, earlier concepts no longer fully captured the realities of international politics. As Andis Kudors (2024) observed, although the concept of soft power remains relevant, it is now insufficient on its own.

In this context, the concept of sharp power emerged, referring to a form of influence that is penetrative, manipulative, or subversive in nature. Coined by the National Endowment for Democracy, the term first appeared in a 2017 report (Walker et al., 2017) in which the authors observed the growing authoritarian influence of countries such as Russia and China. They noted that illiberal regimes are increasingly seeking to penetrate democratic societies by exploiting globalisation-era tools: manipulating information, pressuring political and economic actors, and conducting cyberattacks. Here are several quotations from the publication:

This authoritarian influence is not principally about attraction or even persuasion; instead, it centres on distraction and manipulation. These ambitious authoritarian regimes, which systematically suppress political pluralism and free expression at home, are increasingly seeking to apply similar principles internationally to secure their interests (Walker et al., 2017, p. 6).

Some of the most visible authoritarian influence techniques used by countries such as China and Russia, while not “hard” in the openly coercive sense, are not really “soft” either (Walker et al., 2017, p. 6).

We are in need of a new vocabulary for this phenomenon. What we have to date understood as authoritarian “soft power” is better categorised as “sharp power” that pierces, penetrates, or perforates the political and information environments in the targeted countries. In the new competition that is under way between autocratic and democratic states, the repressive regimes’ “sharp power” techniques should be seen as the tip of their dagger – or indeed as their syringe (Walker et al., 2017, p. 6)

The concept of sharp power refers to a form of influence exerted by authoritarian states over democratic ones through the aggressive and sophisticated use of informational tactics (such as disinformation, manipulation, propaganda, etc.). The goal of sharp power is to undermine the political system of the target state, mislead and divide public opinion, and obscure or deflect attention from negative information about the authoritarian state itself.

Łukasz Skoneczny and Bogusław Cacko defined sharp power as:

aggressive actions of the state carried out with the use of methods imitating soft power elements in order to manipulate the image of a given country (or other entities of international relations), or to destabilise its socio-political system, or to force certain actions by its authorities (Skoneczny & Cacko, 2021, p. 329).

Alternatively, sharp power may be seen as a form of failed soft power employed by authoritarian states (Kudors, 2024), or as an ineffectual attempt to combine hard power and soft power (Tabarintseva-Romanova, 2021).

What primarily distinguishes sharp power from soft power is intent. Unlike soft power, which seeks to attract and inspire cooperation by projecting cultural and political appeal, sharp power is designed to cause

harm and degrade the social fabric of the targeted state. It represents a manipulative and malign inversion of soft power. Authoritarian states lack the institutional and societal foundations to authentically project soft power, which depends not only on state institutions but also on a free civil society and market economy. Consequently, such regimes rely on state-sponsored cultural and academic institutions as well as government-controlled media outlets to carry out destabilising actions.

The concept of sharp power is normative in nature. It goes beyond diagnosing the current state of affairs to articulating how things ought to be. It is grounded in the belief that democracy is superior to authoritarianism and that the rule of law is preferable to legal nihilism (Kudors, 2024).

In response to the emergence of this concept, Joseph S. Nye (2018) argued that sharp power, understood as “the deceptive use of information for hostile purposes, is a type of hard power” as it relies more on coercion than attraction. While this form of influence can be situated within the broader hard power–soft power dichotomy, it is crucial to emphasise that sharp power bears little resemblance to the military or economic instruments typically associated with hard power. It operates within the realm of ideas, not material force (Kudors, 2024), and its primary resource is information (see Table 1).

Table 1. Types of power and their characteristics

Type of power	Hard power	Soft power	Smart power	Sharp power	Normative power
<b>Primary actor (power holder)</b>	The state	Any actor actively engaged in foreign policy	The state + any actor involved in foreign policy  <i>Particularly important role of expert institutions and innovation centres</i>	The state + any actor involved in foreign policy  <i>Particularly important role of the media, including social media</i>	Supranational structures
<b>Core resources used</b>	Military and economic capabilities	Economy, culture, sports, science, education	Economy, culture, sports, science, education + military capabilities + international agreements	Information	Norms, values (including human rights and the UN Sustainable Development Goals), ideas, climate
<b>Examples of implementation</b>	Power-based diplomacy, 'gunboat diplomacy'	Cultural diplomacy, sports diplomacy, science diplomacy, brand diplomacy	Smart diplomacy (traditional diplomacy supported by new technologies, public-private partnerships, and diaspora networks), feminist diplomacy, energy sources diplomacy	Hybrid diplomacy, digital diplomacy, 'ping-pong diplomacy'	Climate (water) diplomacy, human rights diplomacy, humanitarian diplomacy, vaccine diplomacy

Source: Tabarintseva-Romanova, 2021.

Sharp power has developed under specific geopolitical conditions. As Christopher Walker (2016) notes, for a quarter of a century the democratic West pursued a strategy of integrating non-democratic regimes such as Russia and China into the liberal international order. The aim was to draw these regimes into mechanisms of interdependence, with the expectation that this would yield mutual benefits and at least foster the hope that authoritarian states would gradually reform along the lines of Western democracies. However, the opposite occurred. According to Walker, most of these repressive regimes have deepened their authoritarianism and turned it outward. By leveraging globalisation and their integration with the West, these states have set out to undermine the very international institutions and democratic countries that had once opened up to them in good faith. As Walker wrote:

Today, authoritarian regimes are projecting power beyond their borders. They are targeting crucial democratic institutions, including elections and the media. They use deep economic and business ties to export corrupt practices and insinuate themselves into the politics of democracies, both new and established (Walker, 2016, pp. 49–50).

Authoritarian states like Russia and China have taken advantage of globalisation and the mimicry of democratic forms to develop a set of tools, methods, and techniques that represent a distorted reflection of democratic soft power. Their arsenal includes, for instance, government-organised non-governmental organisations (GONGOs) that mimic authentic civil society groups; pseudo-election observation missions (so-called zombie election monitoring) that serve to legitimise fraudulent electoral processes; foreign aid, investment, and expansive activity in both traditional and digital media (Walker, 2016).

The primary aim of sharp power is to erode democracy. As Andis Kudors (2024) observed, its most destructive effects target the core elements of democratic systems: freedom of the press, freedom of speech, the rule of law, human rights, free and fair elections, and the separation of powers. By fostering and exacerbating divisions within target societies, sharp power undermines democracy, weakens national security, and creates new threats.

A defining feature of sharp power is the asymmetry between the authoritarian actor deploying it and the democratic target. Authoritarian

states exploit the openness of liberal democracies to spread their disruptive narratives while simultaneously shielding themselves from external informational influence. Furthermore, they employ both overt and covert tactics to intimidate or restrict journalists working in democratic countries who attempt to report critically on authoritarian regimes. This asymmetry is often also a matter of unequal resources: smaller democratic states typically lack the financial capacity to engage in international media outreach robust enough to counterbalance the ambitions and aggressiveness of well-funded authoritarian regimes (Kudors, 2024).

## Historical analysis of the term

As Joseph S. Nye observed:

The manipulation of ideas, political perceptions, and electoral processes has a long history. Both the United States and the Soviet Union resorted to such methods during the Cold War. [...] What's new is not the basic model; it's the speed with which such disinformation can spread and the low cost of spreading it (Nye, 2018).

As he vividly remarked: “Electrons are cheaper, faster, safer, and more deniable than spies” (Nye, 2018).

Attempts to identify historical examples of sharp power are by definition somewhat anachronistic as the concept emerged in a distinctly modern geopolitical and technological context. Nevertheless, certain historical cases of what Nye calls “the deceptive use of information for hostile purposes” remain strikingly relevant. They support Nye’s claim that the fundamental pattern of what we now label ‘sharp power’ has long existed. One such example comes from the 19th century, another from the 20th. This is not a historical analysis of the concept itself but rather of phenomena that resemble what we now understand as sharp power.

The anti-Polish propaganda campaign following the January Uprising of 1863 occurred during the early development of what we now call ‘mass media’, when the written word remained the principal tool of influence. At that time, the immense power of journalism as a political weapon became evident. Russian press coverage of the

Polish independence movement was marked by brutality, chauvinism, and fanaticism. The campaign enjoyed full support from the Tsarist regime and the approval of Russian society. The most prominent voice in this press offensive was Mikhail Katkov (1818–1887), who published in “Moskovskie Vedomosti” and “Russkii Vestnik”. Polish historian Jan Kucharzewski described Katkov’s writings as follows:

Katkov sounds the alarm about the Polish threat, presenting the Polish movement as a demonic force from which all evils afflicting Russia originate. At the same time, he belittles and ridicules the Polish cause as fictitious, artificially inflated, and essentially non-existent. He calls for a fight to the death and urges that the enemy be treated with contempt and derision by the entire world. He wounds the enemy, insults him, tramples on him, and strikes again. He proclaims that the enemy is already a corpse but insists he must be beaten endlessly” (as quoted in: Piątkowski, 1999, p. 58).

Katkov attacked a vision of Poland that he had himself constructed to justify an aggressive political campaign. He created the image of a collective enemy threatening the Russian Empire. As he wrote:

Poland is dead, but its ghost, like a vampire, returns to suck the blood of the living – and this Polish vampire is the greatest plague upon the Poles themselves. Their enemy is not the one who drives the vampire away but the one who summons it” (as quoted in: Piątkowski, 1999, p. 61).

Katkov portrayed the suppression of Polish independence efforts as a historical necessity:

Polish patriotism is a spectre risen from the grave, having nothing to do with real life, ready to drink the blood of the living. The entire strength of the current Polish uprising lies in sentimentality and nostalgia. Women will weep, youth will perish, clergy will incite both, but no matter how many times this tragic phenomenon is repeated, history will not change its course (as quoted in: Piątkowski, 1999, p. 61).

Katkov also struck at the social fabric of the Polish population. He claimed the January Uprising was not a national movement but the work of the nobility and clergy:

Intrigue, everywhere intrigue, perverse Jesuitical intrigue, Jesuitical both in origin and character [...]. There is not the slightest indication of any internal vitality of a resurrecting nation in this uprising; it is merely the profanation of a corpse.

The entire uprising is a monstrous bluff, an intrigue, nothing more. It began as intrigue, feeds on intrigue, produces intrigue, and exploits every intrigue it encounters (as quoted in: Piątkowski, 1999, pp. 61–62).

Katkov's journalism is a vivid example of the political discrediting of an adversary and of deliberate manipulation of the audience's understanding of the events described. It also served to obscure and distract from uncomfortable truths about the Russian Empire – its repressive and backward nature. Like the January Uprising itself, the campaign played a significant role in 19th-century Russian history and symbolised the Empire's turn toward reactionary nationalism.

Operation Denver (also known as Operation Infektion) is a prime example of aggressive, adversary-discrediting information operations conducted during the Cold War. Orchestrated by the KGB, it aimed to spread the narrative that the United States was responsible for the emergence of the HIV virus, which causes AIDS. It was preceded by two suggestive disinformation 'leaks' in 1985 concerning an alleged American programme to develop 'ethnic-biological weapons'. The first claim alleged that the U.S., in collaboration with the South African government, had developed a bomb designed to kill Black individuals while sparing white people. The second claimed that the U.S. and Israel had co-developed a weapon targeting Arabs while leaving Jews unharmed (Leitenberg, 2020). These fabrications gained traction due to lingering public anxieties over the U.S.'s prior experimentation with biological weapons during the Vietnam War (Stoner, 2021).

Historians of intelligence services regard Operation Denver as one of the most effective disinformation campaigns of the Cold War, skillfully combining overt propaganda with covert KGB operations. The first public mention of the alleged American origin of HIV appeared in the Indian newspaper "The Patriot", which was established by the KGB in 1962 for the specific purpose of disseminating disinformation. The operation gained significant momentum in October 1985 when the Soviet newspaper "Literaturnaya Gazeta" published an article titled *Panic in the West, or what lies behind the sensationalism surrounding AIDS*. This marked the beginning of a coordinated media campaign across Soviet outlets. According to the narrative, HIV had been engineered at Fort Detrick, a U.S. Army research facility, using genetic engineering as part of a classified biological weapons programme. The campaign

further claimed that the U.S. had deliberately released the virus in Africa to cause mass fatalities among the local population. Historians note the extensive international reach of this disinformation campaign: the false narrative appeared in 13 countries in 1985, 49 countries in 1986, and 67 countries in the first half of 1987. U.S. Secretary of State George Shultz raised the issue directly with Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev, demanding an end to the fabrications. Gorbachev reportedly replied, “We are telling the truth, only the truth”, and expressed frustration, stating that the American accusations contradicted the spirit of *glasnost*.

It was not until 1992 that Yevgeny Primakov, then head of the Foreign Intelligence Service of the Russian Federation, publicly admitted that the story about the Pentagon’s deliberate creation of HIV had been fabricated by the KGB (Leitenberg, 2020).

## Discussion of the term

### Methods of sharp power

Andis Kudors, author of an in-depth analysis of Russian policy toward Latvia, identifies nine key methods and techniques of sharp power, based on his observations of Russian activities:

1. Control of narratives. A narrative refers to a spoken or written story that conveys the author’s particular viewpoint on a thing, person, or process. Narratives help audiences interpret situations and assess events through the lens of specific values and myths. Those employed in sharp power strategies typically emphasise a stark division between friends and enemies, advancing ideas and concepts favourable to the propagating actor. These narratives are directed at the social fabric of the targeted society, are often long-lasting, and are saturated with mythic content and emotional intensity, all features that hinder their verification and neutralisation.
2. News ‘voices’. The use of propagandists, politicians, and political scientists with close ties to the regime as influential opinion leaders. They often hold prominent positions in the media ecosystem (e.g., hosting prime-time television programmes)

and focus on foreign policy issues. Their messages, and those of their guests, are frequently aimed at both domestic and international audiences.

3. Synchronicity. This refers to the simultaneous dissemination of identical explanations for a given event across a wide range of state-controlled media outlets (television, online platforms, news agencies, etc.). This strategy fosters the impression that a given interpretation is credible simply because it is echoed by numerous sources. Such uniformity is possible only in authoritarian environments, where access to competing ideologically diverse media is absent.
4. Spin doctoring. This involves turning the message of any news into its opposite. The technique relies heavily on commentary and interpretation, which replace factual reporting.
5. Visual manipulation techniques. This includes staged scenes, selective editing, the use of amateur video recordings, and the deployment of illustrative images or graphics that are unrelated to the events being described but support a particular agenda.
6. Disinformation. Defined as the intentional dissemination of false (or selectively accurate) information designed to prompt a specific audience's reaction that aligns with the goals of the disseminator.
7. Propaganda. Propaganda is one-sided information designed to elicit an emotional response while suppressing rational, critical thought. Unlike accurate reporting or education, which aim to broaden the audience's perspective, propaganda narrows it by offering predetermined answers to complex questions. Through concealed and often sophisticated (e.g., artistic) persuasive techniques, the propagandist guides the audience through a narrowing cognitive tunnel toward an allegedly self-evident 'truth'.
8. Cultivating hatred and fear. Fear may trigger aggression or lead to paralysis, rendering the target unable to respond. Authoritarian states seek to intimidate neighbouring populations as a means of control. They also promote hatred and hostility, which in turn intensify fear.
9. Conspiracy theories. Such theories refer to the belief that an event is the result of a secret plan orchestrated by a hidden

actor. They are harmful to democracy because they hinder the development of civil society. In a world where everything is perceived as controlled by malevolent elites and shadowy groups, grassroots initiatives and civic engagement lose their meaning. Conspiracy theories serve to cultivate fear and hatred as their simplified worldview makes it easy to draw a sharp line between friends and enemies, attributing all negative traits to the latter. They also distort the assessment of facts and blur the line between truth and falsehood, creating ideal conditions for actors seeking to project their own sharp power (Kudors, 2024).

## Russian sharp power

In their valuable study, Serhiy Orlov and Olha Ivasechko (2024) identified five core domains through which Russia projects sharp power: media, culture and entertainment, academia, the economy, and technology.

In the media sphere, the leading outlets are RT, Sputnik, and Channel One (Pervyj). The content disseminated through these channels is often characterised by manipulation and disinformation. Since 2022, new media platforms, especially YouTube, TikTok, and Telegram, have played an increasingly central role in spreading disinformation. TikTok, a Chinese social media platform, has proven particularly effective due to its interface and algorithms, which easily keep users inside 'filter bubbles' and allow for the efficient spread of one-sided narratives about the war. Hashtags such as #RussianLivesMatter and #SvoichNieBrosaiem are widely used to reinforce these messages (Orlov & Ivasechko, 2024).

One frequently used technique is the creation of information noise. The term 'info-noise' refers to an overwhelming stream of low-value or meaningless news, often generated by politicians or officials. As a result, audiences become fatigued and lose trust in media as a source of reliable information. Another technique is 'pink slime journalism', which refers to the deliberate creation of news distribution networks that promote disinformation. The term originates from the food industry, where 'pink slime' denotes a cheap filler added to meat products. Analogously, pink slime journalism produces a low-cost, low-quality substitute for credible reporting. These networks

often take the form of supposedly local, independent news outlets that are in fact managed by low-paid freelancers or bots. They publish politically biased propagandistic content and blend credible sources with material from Russian agencies to lend a veneer of legitimacy.

Similar practices are found on content aggregator platforms, such as Digg, Reddit, and Wykop in Poland. These platforms allow users to share links and engage in discussions that can artificially elevate certain narratives. While aggregators can facilitate the sharing of valuable information, they also enable the spread of unverified or false content, especially when it is mixed with credible reporting. The broader goal of pink slime journalism is to undermine trust in legitimate media, spread disinformation, and manipulate public opinion (Orlov & Ivasechko, 2024).

One example of such manipulation through aggregators is the 'Pizzagate' conspiracy, which was fuelled by Russian trolls in the United States in 2016. The fabricated story claimed that Hillary Clinton operated a child trafficking ring in the basement of Comet Ping Pong Pizza, a restaurant popular among Democrats. Posts about the story appeared on Reddit, 4chan, and Twitter. At the height of the hysteria, a 28-year-old man from North Carolina travelled to Washington, D.C., armed with an AR-15 rifle, intending to 'rescue' children he believed were being held captive (Stoner, 2021).

Another sharp power technique is framing. This involves selecting a stereotypical, simplified 'frame' through which to depict an individual, group, demographic community, institution, or state. A prime example is the constructed and carefully maintained image of Vladimir Putin as a charismatic leader (Orlov & Ivasechko, 2024).

Spin doctoring, i.e., the deliberate inversion of meaning in news content, is illustrated by Andis Kudors in his analysis of the Poland–Belarus border crisis. This crisis was deliberately provoked by Alexander Lukashenko, who facilitated the arrival of migrants from Iraq and pushed them toward the fortified Polish border. However, Belarusian and Russian media reversed the narrative: they blamed the European Union for the crisis, accused Poland of lacking humanitarian concern, and went so far as to claim that Ukraine was supplying weapons to the Iraqi migrants to incite conflict at the border (Kudors, 2024).

In the realm of culture and entertainment, Russian sharp power relies heavily on narrativisation, i.e., the strategic use of storytelling as a tool

of influence. Narratives function as persuasive mechanisms, providing simplified explanatory frameworks and drawing attention. The human mind reacts far more strongly to stories than to abstract facts, which makes the narrative – a story-based, simplified explanation of reality – easier to absorb with minimal resistance or scepticism. Contemporary Russian information space is saturated with recurring slogan-narratives such as: “Russia is an innocent victim”. “The collapse of Western civilisation is inevitable”, and “Grassroots social movements are U.S.-sponsored colour revolutions” (Orlov & Ivasechko, 2024). Narratives require historical context as they rely on the past as a foundation. This is why the politics of memory plays such a central role in Russia’s strategy of narrativisation. According to Ukrainian researchers, Russia uses the politics of memory not only to promote a positive image of the state but also to strengthen a shared group identity and discredit other nations through historical analogies – the most striking example being the frequent labelling of Ukrainians as ‘Kiev neo-Nazis’ (Orlov & Ivasechko, 2024, p. 272).

The dissemination of such narratives is led by so-called ‘opinion leaders’ – in practice, state-aligned propagandists who are caricatures of credible journalists in countries with press freedom. One notable figure is Vladimir Solovyov, who hosts politically charged programmes on Russian state television filled with inflammatory rhetoric targeting the United States, the Baltic states, Ukraine, and Poland (Kudors, 2024).

Another significant conception is that of the ‘*ruskiy mir*’ (the Russian world), which carries geopolitical, axiological, and cultural dimensions (Orzechowski, 2024). Russia effectively uses the notion of compatriots, referring not only to Russian citizens but also to individuals abroad who, according to Moscow, express interest in Russia, care about its present and future, and remain within the orbit of the ‘*ruskiy mir*’. This conception exerts strong influence across the post-Soviet space. At the institutional level, these efforts are led by organisations such as *Rossotrudnichestvo* and the *Ruskiy Mir Foundation* (Orlov & Ivasechko, 2024).

Russian sharp power also extends into the academic sphere. It includes partnerships between research institutions, the organisation of conferences and debates on controversial topics, and efforts to reinforce pro-Russian narratives, including a series of ‘anti-Russophobia’ conferences held in various countries. Particularly important are *Ruskiy*

Mir centres and their smaller counterparts, Russkiy Mir cabinets. Modelled after China's Confucius Institutes or Germany's Goethe-Instituts, they formally operate as centres promoting Russian language and culture. In practice, however, their activities often go beyond education and include intelligence gathering and manipulation of academic knowledge (Orlov & Ivasechko, 2024).

In his study of Russian academic activity in the UK, Andrew Foxall noted that Russkiy Mir promotes ideas and values that challenge Western traditions and that its operations are closely coordinated by actors working in the Kremlin's interest. Such influence has been facilitated through agreements signed with universities in Edinburgh, Oxford, and Durham. For instance, in February 2014, just before the annexation of Crimea, a joint event organised by Russkiy Mir and St. Antony's College at Oxford hosted a discussion titled "Cultural Memory in Sevastopol: The Ukrainian City of Russian Glory" (Foxall, 2019).

Concerns about Russian intelligence-gathering operations also emerged at the University of Cambridge, where it was revealed that Veruscript – a sponsor of the Cambridge Intelligence Seminar – had close ties to the upper echelons of Russian business and politics. This raised fears that Veruscript was steering academic debate in a direction favourable to Kremlin interests. As a result, several leading seminar organisers, including a former head of MI6 and the official historian of MI5, withdrew from the project. Another case involved a professor at the University of Bath who, during a previous academic appointment at the University of Copenhagen, acted as a 'talent spotter' for Russian intelligence services (for which he was later convicted in Denmark) (Foxall, 2019).

Yet another manifestation of Russian influence in academia involves the suppression of publications and appearances by scholars critical of Russian authorities. In 2017, a planned academic event at Sciences Po in Paris featuring David Satter, the author of *The Less You Know, the Better You Sleep: Russia's Road to Terror and Dictatorship under Yeltsin and Putin*, was cancelled. Unofficial reports suggested that the university feared losing joint programmes with three Moscow-based institutions. Earlier, in 2014, American scholar Karen Dawisha was denied publication by Cambridge University Press for her book on the ties between business, organised crime, and intelligence agencies in 1990s

St. Petersburg – networks that helped bring Vladimir Putin to power. Both Dawisha and the publisher cited the UK's strict defamation laws as the main obstacle. The book was eventually published by Simon & Schuster under the title *Putin's Kleptocracy: Who Owns Russia?*

## Chinese sharp power

Although it shares certain features with Russian influence strategies, Chinese sharp power possesses its own distinct characteristics. China seeks to shape narratives in target countries and influence political discourse to align with its strategic interests. Through media control and information manipulation, it attempts to silence criticism and present its policies in a favourable light. By shaping public opinion, China aims to safeguard its economic position and minimise resistance to international initiatives such as its Belt and Road Initiative. Chinese sharp power is exerted by a diverse array of actors, including Chinese intelligence services, diplomatic missions, the People's Liberation Army, business entities, chambers of commerce, the United Front Work Department of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), cultural institutions, media outlets, students, academics, netizens, and even organised criminal groups (Chazisa & Lutmar, 2025).

One of the most noteworthy dimensions of Chinese sharp power is its broad and innovative use of emerging cutting-edge technologies. Samantha Hoffman characterises China as an example of “tech-enhanced authoritarianism” (Hoffman, 2023). These technological tools are deployed not only domestically to consolidate CCP control but also externally. For example, ‘smart city’ projects that rely on the Internet of Things (IoT) may offer public service benefits but also serve as powerful instruments of population surveillance. China has supported such technologies in countries such as Zimbabwe and Uganda (Hoffman, 2023), where they have been repurposed for political control by those in power. A further concern involves Chinese tools and platforms that facilitate illegal data mining. As Hoffman noted:

Emerging technologies, particularly those that utilise big data, are a critical component of the CCP's efforts to know and manipulate its international audiences. Large datasets can reveal patterns and trends in human behaviour, enabling the

party to better understand public sentiment, which could, among other things, help the party-state to disseminate propaganda more effectively (Hoffman, 2023, p. 88).

The technological dimension of sharp power clearly warrants serious attention. Countering this creeping form of aggression presents a particularly urgent challenge for democratic societies.

## Systematic reflection with conclusions and recommendations

Sharp power is a concept with a distinctly normative character. It arises from a fundamental comparison between democracies and non-democracies, grounded in the premise that the former are superior. This assumption also provides a framework for assessing truth in public life: in free and open societies, where freedom of expression, a free press, and pluralism of ideas are protected, it is easier to verify information, challenge opposing viewpoints, disprove erroneous claims, and expose disinformation. In authoritarian and closed societies, by contrast, freedom of speech is curtailed, media are state-controlled, public narratives are shaped by rigid ideological assumptions, and systemic mechanisms for elevating truth in public discourse are lacking. The external behaviour of democracies and authoritarian regimes is similarly determined. In the realm of ideas, the former attract others through their inherent appeal rooted in freedom, while the latter rely on the sophisticated, cynical, and manipulative use of information to exert influence in pursuit of their own interests.

Sharp power is a deeply politicised concept. It emerged during a period of intensified competition between the liberal West and authoritarian regimes such as Russia and China. This is not only a clash of norms and values but also a geopolitical contest rooted in tangible material interests.

Societies that value freedom and truth must draw strength from those very values. In responding to the deceptive influence of authoritarian regimes, democracies must avoid replicating their methods, such as suppressing free speech, censoring politically inconvenient media, imposing official narratives, or stigmatising dissent.

Authoritarian regimes exploit the current vulnerabilities of democratic societies: declining public trust in government, driven by the detachment of political elites from ordinary citizens; growing social polarisation; the erosion of open debate caused by ideological conformity; the rise of populism; and a failure to address mounting global challenges such as migration and social inequality. Thus, any reflection on the nature of sharp power must also consider the internal condition of the democratic states which are the primary targets of its influence.

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