

Sharp Power: Rising Authoritarian Influence

This discussion on the rising authoritarian influence in the democratic world took place on February 26, 2018 in the Senate of the Czech Republic, Plenary Session Hall. The attendees of the conference included Spanish journalist Juan Pablo Cardenal, Czech sinologist Martin Hála, Slovak political scientist Grigory Mesežnikov, and the distinguished Polish analyst Jacek Kucharczyk. Opening remarks were delivered by the Director of the Forum 2000 Foundation, Jakub Klepal and Senator Tomáš Czernin. The discussion was moderated by Shanthi Kalathil, the Director of the International Forum for Democratic Studies. The dialogue elaborated on the ways Russia and China have attempted to shape public opinion and perceptions around the world through false information, propaganda, and election meddling through means of sharp power. Tomáš Czernin said: "Today we have to face new threats and attacks to our freedom. There are no armed men crossing borders, there is no declaration of war, there is no violent over-taking of power in the country. It is much worse. Today the borders are being crossed in our minds, by undermining the sense of justice and the meaning of the law. Today it's the power of our will to be taken down."

"Sharp Power" is about making divisions in politics, culture, and social platforms. The aim of authoritarian regimes through sharp power is not to make their country more attractive, but to manipulate the entire global space to their benefit. "The current regime in Russia clearly believes the political changes that took place in Central and Eastern Europe nearly 30 years ago are reversible," said Grigorij Meseznikov.

Although Russia and China have similar interests in bending the global space, their aims and tactics look differently. The concept of differentiation for China is very important, according to Meseznikov. China differentiates Central European countries from the rest of the world by tailoring their tactics of influence according to the unique vulnerabilities of Central Europe. Russia's propaganda is blunt, rarely subtle, and used to manipulate current issues that maintain Russia's superiority in the global order. "Russian propaganda efforts in the Czech Republic get much more attention than those of China, being far more provocative & less sophisticated. Unlike China, Russia doesn't seem to have a long-term plan beyond destabilization," said Martin Hála.

In Central Europe, Russia promotes narratives that are customized to the local political conflicts. Jacek Kucharczyk said about this matter: "The present government in Poland may be nominally anti-Russian but outcomes of its policies are more and more aligned with Russia's interests as they increasingly isolate Poland from its European/Western allies."

According to Cardenal, China benefits greatly from a lack of awareness from the general population regarding its aim for complete global control. China aligns with sharp power in that it promotes anti-western messaging and presents a complete alternative order of governance. According to Kucharczyk, China believes, and is hoping to prove, that having a successful and economically thriving country is not contingent on that country having a democracy and established civil rights. The country not only presents prospects of economic cooperation but also of social cooperation. This means of social cooperation makes Chinese influence less identifiable than Russian influence. "Ties between China and Argentina continue to grow closer even after the change of government in 2015, China is very active in pushing its media content & organizing trainings where influential people are exposed to Chinese propaganda," said Juan Pablo Cardenal.

Therein lies the main difference between Russian and Chinese influence that the discussion came to; Russia wishes simply to maintain its power and influence in the world today while China is trying to corrupt the entire existing order to yield to its own interests for long-term global control tomorrow.