

## Europe's Authoritarian Challenge

Europe is at the center of two defining trends in international politics today: renewed great power competition and the resurgence of global authoritarianism. Migration, the rise of extreme nationalism, Brexit, and fractured ties with the United States all increasingly make European countries more vulnerable to Russian and Chinese authoritarian influence—a spectrum of overt and covert activities that range from benign state tools such as public diplomacy to more malevolent efforts including direct interference in electoral processes—that presents a growing set of challenges to European cohesion and stability.

Russia sees European democracy, prosperity, and particularly the European security order as inherently aimed at weakening Russia. Putin has, therefore, taken steps to expedite its decline.<sup>1</sup> China, on the other hand, prefers a stable Europe that can serve as a trading partner, albeit a fractured one willing to operate on Chinese terms. Despite differing capabilities and tolerance for risk, Russia and China share underlying objectives in Europe: undermine democratic norms, weaken European institutions and cohesion, and capitalize on fissures in the transatlantic relationship.<sup>2</sup> Their strategies are carried out at the expense of free and open societies, but Europe has been slow to forge a coherent counter-strategy.

A key reason for this latency is that the distinct vectors of Russian and Chinese influence are difficult to piece together into a coherent threat assessment, not least because Moscow and Beijing frequently rely on deniable tools and tactics that are

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not overtly linked to promoting an authoritarian ideology. However, these separate channels of influence add up to a comprehensive effort to weaken democracy's appeal and ability to function effectively in Europe.

Russian and Chinese authoritarian tactics explored in this article include four channels of activity:

- malign finance and economic coercion;
- political subversion;
- information operations; and
- cyberattacks.<sup>3</sup>

Through these tools, both Russia and China endeavor to shape the information environment, discredit critics, cultivate influence through proxies, and make coercive investments. Their efforts tend to be “clandestine, deniable, and invasive;”<sup>4</sup> opportunistic; exploitative of loopholes and other weaknesses; and pursued as a matter of course.<sup>5</sup> Growing synergies between Russia and China and their activities in Europe are also having a compounding effect on the continent's democratic processes, even if those activities aren't fully coordinated.

Moving forward, it will be incumbent on European policymakers to avoid looking at any one vector in isolation and to close vulnerabilities across their political systems, economies, and societies. But first, both policymakers and the public must see the forest through the trees and acknowledge the effects that Russian and Chinese influence is having on European democratic institutions and norms.

### **Russia's Asymmetric Toolkit**

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In part to compensate for economic and traditional military weaknesses compared to Western powers, Russia uses a suite of asymmetric tools to weaken European societies and the transatlantic alliance. These include malign finance and economic coercion that enable the Russian government and its proxies to peddle influence, subvert local political and social groups, and capture elites; information operations that aim to polarize public debates and diminish social trust; and cyberattacks against essential institutions of democracy, including legislatures and media organizations, in target societies. The goal of these operations is to weaken the West and gain relative power.

Elections are a flashpoint for Russian interference and have been since shortly after the collapse of the Soviet Union. As early as 1994, Russia began interfering in the elections of its nearest neighbors, primarily in support of pro-Russian candidates.<sup>6</sup> Since 2014, that meddling has crept steadily west, reaching France,

Germany, and the United Kingdom, among others in Europe. Russia's targeting of the European Parliament elections this year was, the European Commission concluded, "continued and sustained."<sup>7</sup>

But elections are not the start or end point for Russia's interference operations in Europe, which put in their crosshairs a broad range of political events, critical infrastructure elements, and civil society groups. "If we return to Clausewitz's definition of war as the continuation of policy by other means," argued former prime minister of Estonia, Toomas Hendrik Ilves, in testimony before the US Senate, "then what we are seeing is clearly the continuation of policy by other means. And then we must think not just about critical infrastructure attacks as war but attacks on democratic elections in the same light."<sup>8</sup> These activities exploit existing social divisions and institutional vulnerabilities in Europe and diminish the public's confidence in democracy as a system of governance.

### **Malign Finance and Economic Coercion**

Both legally and otherwise, Russia brings money into Europe to buy influence in European politics, including by funding political parties and corrupting individual leaders. It takes advantage of European markets to launder funds and enrich useful elites. And it provides non-transparent financial support for domestic civil society groups to build an influential network and promote divisive narratives that advance Russian interests.<sup>9</sup> These are malign financial tactics.

The Russian government and its proxies also deploy state assets as leverage to bully neighboring countries and cultivate economic dependencies, particularly within the energy sector.<sup>10</sup> Energy supply cutoffs, opaque or unfair contracts, and favorable deals in return for support for the Kremlin's interests are tools of strategic economic coercion, and Moscow makes full use of them in advancing its policy goals abroad. These activities undermine good governance and rule of law in Europe and dent democracy's appeal by promoting corruption that makes governments less responsive to citizens.

Russia makes extensive use of both licit and illicit financial activity to influence European society, often through non-transparent support for political parties or organizations aligned with the Russian government. In the United Kingdom, Russian oligarchs—introduced by the then-Russian ambassador in London—reportedly offered exclusive investment opportunities to the largest funder of

**T**he Russian government deploys state assets as leverage, particularly within the energy sector.

the Leave.EU campaign ahead of the 2016 Brexit referendum.<sup>11</sup> In the years prior to France's 2017 presidential election, a bank tied to Putin's cronies loaned far-right presidential candidate Marine Le Pen's party more than US\$10 million on the understanding that she would recognize Russia's annexation of Crimea. Both schemes were legal under local law. Only half of Europe's member states fully ban foreign donations; 11 have partial restrictions in place, but they vary in scope. The patchwork nature of national campaign finance regulations creates loopholes vulnerable to exploitation.<sup>12</sup>

These operations often involve banks or individuals complicit in Russian money laundering. First Czech Russian Bank, one of two through which the Kremlin issued its loan to Marine Le Pen, was involved in the Russian Laundromat—a scheme that moved as much as US\$80 billion in assets out of Russia through global banks to protect them from Western law enforcement mechanisms.<sup>13</sup> As with campaign finance regulations, weak links in the EU's financial supervisory architecture hinder efforts to prevent money laundering at scale. Because of the nature of the single market, Russia and its proxies can undermine Europe's entire financial supervisory system by exploiting a vulnerability in an individual member state.

**Europe's entire financial system can be exploited by vulnerability in a single small state.**

That leaves smaller states, often with limited resources, with deeper economic ties to Russia to serve as points of vulnerability.<sup>14</sup> These malign financial maneuvers undermine the integrity of Western political and financial systems.

As part of its strategic economic coercion to weaken the political independence of European nations, Russian state-linked companies gain

leverage through non-transparent or below market-value energy agreements. Russian energy company Gazprom had binding obligations imposed on it by the European Commission for breaching antitrust rules in eight member states.<sup>15</sup> In 2014, Viktor Orban's government in Hungary signed a non-transparent nuclear deal with Russia's Rosatom, a nuclear power company.<sup>16</sup> The deal, which included a more than US\$10 billion loan from Russia, was finalized not long after the Hungarian Parliament passed a bill removing a requirement for public competition and extended an official secrecy period on disclosing the terms to 15 years.<sup>17</sup>

The Russian government also uses its market power to strong-arm neighboring countries to pursue foreign policies that serve the Kremlin's interests or to punish them for doing otherwise. Since 2006, Russia has used the threat of gas supply cutoffs, especially in winter, to shape political events in Ukraine and beyond.<sup>18</sup> The Nord Stream II pipeline, which Russia plans to bring online next year, will

circumvent Ukraine entirely and thus make it easier for Russia to shut off gas to Ukraine without losing its broader European energy market.<sup>19</sup> In 2017, state-controlled Russian Railways slashed cargo transit through Latvia in response to that country's opposition to Nord Stream II.<sup>20</sup> In 2008, Russian state-owned oil pipeline company *Transneft* halved total oil deliveries to the Czech Republic after it agreed to host part of the US anti-ballistic missile shield program.<sup>21</sup> Because Russian energy dominance has proven so valuable, Russian entities have acted to impede the development of alternative energy sources in order to maintain that dominance. Gazprom is accused of blocking shale gas exploration in Bulgaria and allegedly paying consultancies as well as environmental groups in Brussels with funds transferred from opaque intermediaries.<sup>22</sup> The Gazprom campaign also qualified as political subversion, underscoring Russia's use of multiple tools in combination.

### **Political Subversion**

Russia backs politicians and advocacy groups within Europe, often at the extremes of the political spectrum, through financial or other covert or subversive means.<sup>23</sup> As with information operations, the goal of these endeavors is to support divisive or extremist views and promote politicians as well as political narratives that advance Russia's agenda. Polarization makes governing more difficult and fuels illiberal populist groups that further Russia's foreign policy goals, including undermining the European project and damaging transatlantic ties. Support for these groups is not motivated by ideology—Russia has backed movements in Europe on both the far-left and far-right of the political spectrum. Russia's support for these movements is utilitarian—a means of chipping away at support for the transatlantic status quo.<sup>24</sup>

In addition to supporting a variety of Eurosceptic, populist political organizations—the British Leave campaign, Le Pen's National Front party in France, Alternative for Germany (AfD) in Germany, among others—Russian entities establish and finance government-aligned NGOs and think tanks within Europe. Former Russian Railways executive and Putin associate Vladimir Yakunin funds a network of think tanks, the Dialogue of Civilizations, that support and spread the Kremlin's agenda.<sup>25</sup> These organizations legitimize the Kremlin's foreign policy goals and create inroads for its representatives.

Russian proxies have also worked to prompt local activists to organize political protests. In Hungary, Poland, and the Czech Republic, Aleksandr Usovsky—associate of Russian oligarch and Putin confidante, Konstantin Malofeev—attempted to fund demonstrations among fringe activists on both left and right.<sup>26</sup> Here as elsewhere, the Kremlin's goal is not to advance a particular ideology but to exacerbate division. In Sweden, a Russian TV crew sought to

bribe local youth to riot on camera in an apparent effort to inflame the debate over migration.<sup>27</sup> These efforts aim to amplify discord and depict democracies as fractious and unappealing.

In other cases, Russia and its proxies have coopted political figures for the purpose of increasing leverage in target countries. In 2005, just weeks before stepping down as Germany's Chancellor, Gerhard Schröder signed the North European Gas Pipeline deal (later renamed Nord Stream). Directly after leaving office, he became chairman of the Gazprom subsidiary responsible for the project. In the words of Ukrainian Foreign Minister Pavlo Klimkin, he is now "the most important lobbyist for Putin worldwide."<sup>28</sup> Underscoring the multi-dimensional nature of Russia's asymmetric toolkit, acts of political subversion frequently contain a malign financial element.

### **Information Operations**

Using state media, online troll farms, and a network of sympathetic activists to spread content designed to polarize and mislead, Russia exploits existing divisions within European societies.<sup>29</sup> As with Russia's support for politicians and advocacy groups inside target countries, the goal of these operations is utilitarian, not ideological. They are directed at both sides of the political spectrum for the purpose of weakening transatlantic consensus. Raising the salience of polarizing narratives and promoting a sympathetic view of Russia is a means to that end.

The Russian government and its proxies make coordinated use of social and traditional media to manipulate public debate by inserting or amplifying false, misleading, or divisive narratives. After Russian military intelligence poisoned former British-Russian double agent Sergei Skripal and his daughter Yulia in the United Kingdom, Russian state-controlled news agencies promoted conspiracy theories to distract from the Kremlin's culpability. Among the alternative theories are that the poisoning was carried out by the British government, by the United States, by a drone, and by Yulia Skripal's future mother-in-law.<sup>30</sup> Russia made use of similar tactics after the downing of Malaysian Airlines Flight 17 by Russian-affiliated rebels over Ukraine, also to limit damage to Russia's reputation.<sup>31</sup>

While these operations frequently target major political events—Brexit in the United Kingdom, the Catalan independence referendum in Spain, and any number of elections both national and European—they are also carried out on a regular basis at other times. Russian government-controlled media holdings consistently aim to advance narratives sympathetic to Moscow's positions. At the height of Europe's migrant crisis, which Russia sought to inflame, Russian state-controlled media amplified the accusations of a 13-year-old girl who

claimed to have been raped by migrants. She later recanted her story,<sup>32</sup> but not before RT, Sputnik, and the Russian Foreign Ministry made use of her claims to aggravate anti-migrant sentiment throughout Europe. That sentiment is the grist that feeds illiberal populist movements that share many of Russia's foreign policy objectives.<sup>33</sup>

### Cyberattacks

The Russian government and its proxies frequently deploy cyberattacks against government institutions, businesses, and media organizations in Europe. These operations have two goals. First, by disrupting essential institutions and driving up polarization, they make it more difficult to govern effectively, weakening democracy's appeal.<sup>34</sup> Second, by punishing entities perceived to threaten Russian interests, they provide a measure of deterrence (retaliation) against those who would hold Russia accountable for its destabilizing activities.

Russia and its proxies steal proprietary information and weaponize it by strategically releasing it to the public. As part of its efforts to bolster the fortunes of Marine LePen, Russian hackers stole thousands of documents from Emanuel Macron's *La France en Marche* party. Russian proxy media and an army of bot accounts spread the materials, some altered. The operation was timed for impact: days before the second and final round of voting concluded and hours ahead of the blackout period on official campaigning.<sup>35</sup> Russian hacking operations have targeted over 200 discrete victims in almost 40 countries among them Greece, Latvia, Sweden, Ukraine, and the Visegrád countries.<sup>36</sup>

**Cyberattacks also deter entities who would hold Russia accountable for its destabilizing activities.**

The operations often aim to disrupt organizations essential to the functioning of democracy, from legislatures—including the German Bundestag and UK Parliament—to political parties in Estonia, France, and Germany.<sup>37</sup> They also target infrastructure, including energy systems in Estonia and Ukraine, and transportation hubs in the Ukrainian cities of Kyiv and Odesa.<sup>38</sup>

Russia's cyber operations frequently target organizations perceived as threatening the Kremlin's interests. Dutch intelligence foiled a series of cyberattacks against the Organization for the Prevention of Chemical Weapons, responsible for investigating the Skripal poisoning and chemical attacks on Syrian civilians. Other targets have included the OSCE monitoring group in Ukraine, which tracks Russian activity in the Donbas region,<sup>39</sup> and the Integrity Initiative, a UK-government funded think tank that exposes Russian

disinformation.<sup>40</sup> These efforts aim to impose costs on individuals and institutions that might counter Russia's illicit activity abroad.

## China's Multifaceted Approach

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**C**hina seems more bent on gaining economic and political concessions from a Europe that is fractured.

Unlike Vladimir Putin, China's President Xi Jinping does not appear bent on dividing European or transatlantic security partnerships and exploiting political instability. There is no denying, however, that China is better able to gain economic and political concessions from a Europe that is fractured. This "divide and rule" strategy aims to build support from individual European countries for Chinese policies on issues ranging from human rights to the South China Sea. The implications of Chinese influence on European democratic institutions may seem opaque compared to Russian political interference, but the negative consequences are mounting.

China's authoritarian influence in Europe is both passive and active. Passively, China's economic progress in recent decades alongside its powerful communist political system provides countries with a successful authoritarian model for their own economic development. The China model stands in stark contrast to lessons learned from the global democratization wave of the 1990s,<sup>41</sup> during which economic advancement and liberal democratic governance were considered to go hand in hand. Governments in nations such as Poland and Hungary that are carrying out illiberal measures, along with nationalist and populist movements on the rise across several European countries, can now look to China as an alternative to the liberal democratic model they are pushing back against.

Actively, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) carries out influence campaigns through what it calls a "United Front" strategy, which incorporates a broad array of institutions and organizations within the Chinese state. The United Front approach, according to China analyst June Teufel Dreyer, "aims to influence the policies of foreign states toward Chinese ends, through means that may be legal, illegal, or exploit gray areas."<sup>42</sup> China's United Front strategy has four primary objectives: propaganda and censorship, developing and maintaining people-to-people relations, using economic ties as political leverage, and gathering intelligence from non-intelligence sources.<sup>43</sup> The use of United Front work has only grown under President Xi, who in October 2017 referred to this

method of influence as “an important magic weapon for the victory of the party’s cause.”<sup>44</sup>

### **Malign Finance and Economic Coercion**

China’s economic weight gives it a relative power advantage in exacting leverage over European states, particularly smaller economies. Market opportunities in China and promises of investment in European countries make Chinese economic engagement—among even the wealthiest of European countries such as Germany, France, and the United Kingdom—look more like an opportunity than a threat.

China uses the Belt Road Initiative (BRI), its plan to invest in and purchase infrastructure along important trading routes, to enhance economic influence on the continent. Funding behind the BRI already amounts to more than US\$200 billion and could run as high as US\$1.3 trillion by 2027, according to some estimates.<sup>45</sup> The focus of the BRI is primarily on developing economic and political inroads throughout Asia, but in recent years, the BRI has run deeper into the heart of Europe. In March, Italy became the first G7 country to sign a formal memorandum of understanding with China to receive funds as part of the BRI.

A major tool of Chinese economic engagement in Europe is the purchasing of and investing in European ports by Chinese companies. One Chinese state-owned enterprise, COSCO Shipping, holds a majority stake in Greece’s Piraeus port and significant shares in other European terminals in Belgium, Italy, Spain and the Netherlands.<sup>46</sup> Another platform is the 17 + 1 format, an initiative aimed at intensifying economic cooperation between China and 17 Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries, including 12 EU states.<sup>47</sup> Illustrative of China’s preference to negotiate directly with relatively less powerful economies, 17 + 1 allows China to exact preferential terms of investment as well as economic relationships and build political leverage over smaller European states. These investments provide European countries with much-needed financing—particularly in Greece during the sovereign debt crisis. But despite promises of “win-win” outcomes, Beijing’s investments, like Moscow’s, can lack transparency and boost corruption while burdening recipient countries with debt.<sup>48</sup>

China’s economic leverage is also breaking European unity on pushing back against Chinese coercive and repressive policies. In July 2016, Hungary and Greece watered down an EU statement on Chinese aggression in the South China Sea.<sup>49</sup> In June 2017, Greece inhibited the EU from issuing a statement on Chinese human rights violations.<sup>50</sup> In July 2019, 22 countries condemned China’s repression of Uyghur Muslims in the Western Chinese province of Xinjiang through a joint statement at the UN Human Rights Council.<sup>51</sup> While

18 of those countries were European, the only Central and Eastern European countries in the 17 + 1 to criticize China were Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. Greece, Hungary, and Italy, all recipients of significant Chinese funding, were not among the signatories. This is a clear illustration of how Beijing, like Moscow, deploys strategic economic coercion to pressure European governments to take friendly positions, undermining their political independence.

Finally, Chinese economic engagement is weakening European governments' resolve to strengthen democratic institutions at home. For example, Chinese investment is reducing the Serbian government's (among other EU candidate countries') need for EU funding and therefore its willingness to enact structural reforms required for EU accession such as strengthening the rule of law.<sup>52</sup> While the EU remains the largest donor in the Republic of Serbia,<sup>53</sup> Belgrade has attracted billions of dollars from China (primarily in infrastructure investment) in recent years and is seeking billions more from Beijing.<sup>54</sup> Whereas some of Europe's pre-accession funds go toward making progress in areas such as in the rule of law, democracy, and public administration,<sup>55</sup> China's investments do not come with such strings attached—raising the potential for greater corruption and less accountability among political elites.

### Political Subversion

While normal public diplomacy practices are acceptable forms of any state's foreign policy, political and societal engagement become illegitimate when it is pursued with an intentional lack of transparency.<sup>56</sup> Chinese influence activities

**While Russia gains access through covert corruption, China tends to rely on overt economic investment.**

target a broad range of actors in Europe, from universities and think tanks to local and national governments. Like Russia, a primary objective of Chinese influence across sectors is to gain access to political elites in order to shape policy toward China. However, while Russia gains this access through covert corruption, China tends to rely on overt economic investment.

China's sizeable domestic market is a key lever for this economic influence. European companies are pressured into supporting CCP lines on sensitive issues including Tibet and Taiwan for fear of economic retribution and loss of market access. One such pressure campaign came in 2017, when German automaker Daimler decided to issue a public apology after it promoted the Dalai Lama over its social media account and was heavily rebuked in the *People's Daily*, the CCP's official newspaper.<sup>57</sup>

Promises of Chinese investment by Chinese state-owned enterprises (SOEs) and companies are another important lever of political influence, particularly in Central and Eastern European countries. In 2014 in the Czech Republic, CEFC China Energy, a major Chinese company with close ties to the Chinese party, promised more than a billion US dollars of investments in the country. In return, the company's chairman was named a special advisor to the Czech president, Milos Zeman. Zeman has since remained a loyal supporter of Chinese economic engagement in the Czech Republic and across Europe. As Chinese tech company Huawei makes a concerted play to roll out 5G networks in Europe, Zeman has repeatedly promoted use of the technology despite the fact that his country's security apparatus labeled Huawei a risk.<sup>58</sup>

Most illustrations of China's direct political interference to date have taken place outside Europe, in countries closer to China's periphery such as Australia and New Zealand. In both countries, Chinese money has made its way into mainstream political parties. According to GPPI, a Berlin-based think tank, roughly 80 percent of all foreign political donations to Australian parties between 2000 and 2016 came from China.<sup>59</sup> While these issues are not yet on the radar of many European policymakers, Australia's experience with Chinese political influence portend similar practices in Europe as Chinese economic engagement and political interests on the continent grow.

There is extensive Chinese influence in research and academic settings across Europe that have political objectives. This influence has been a longstanding concern in the United States, where universities that host politically sensitive events or speakers have come under pressure from Chinese diplomats and Chinese student organizations.<sup>60</sup> But it is becoming a critical issue in Europe, where Chinese state-led and -funded Confucius institutes (there are now 160 across Europe) are coming under scrutiny. While the purported goal of Confucius Institutes is to teach Chinese language courses and promote Chinese culture, there are strict rules over how Chinese history and politics are covered, putting at risk principles of free inquiry that underpin open societies. These concerns have led some universities, including Stockholm University in Sweden, to close their Confucius centers.

Finally, the PRC is increasingly relying on Chinese nationals and students abroad to report and silence voices that are critical of Chinese government policies. The Chinese Students and Scholars Association (CSSA), with over 150 branches across US campuses,<sup>61</sup> has become a tool for the Chinese government to issue grievances over university visits by the Dalai Lama or other notable individuals with a track record of advocating for human rights or criticizing the Chinese government.

### Information Operations

Until recently, the Chinese government's control over the information environment was considered a domestic issue. The "Great Firewall of China," the CCP's massive system of censorship and information control over its own citizens, has been heralded as an example of how authoritarian regimes can manage information within their borders. But in recent years, the government's ability to control information has grown stronger under President Xi and new artificial intelligence (AI) technologies, and it is now going global. According to the National Endowment for Democracy's Shanthi Kalathil, China attempts to harness global information ecosystem "through a combination of market-oriented mechanisms, propaganda, pressure tactics, and action in international arenas."<sup>62</sup> Kalathil adds that such mechanisms include shaping international news media, guiding discussions around global internet norms, and influencing culture through Hollywood.

Europe is becoming a key theater for the CCP's efforts. Compared to Russia, Chinese actors use a more constructive approach to carry out information campaigns. In other words, unlike Russian state and nonstate actors that use social media tools to spread disinformation and exploit divisions within

**Russian actors exploit divisions; Chinese campaigns more often advance the appeal of China.**

European societies, Chinese information and media campaigns are more often attempts to advance the appeal of Chinese culture, values, and traditions. Yet, Chinese messaging is increasingly misleading and ultimately focused on establishing control over narratives on Chinese interests, domestic politics, and foreign policy.

Through purchases of European media companies and the lure of the Chinese

market to encourage self-censorship, China is building support for official CCP narratives in the European public discourse and information space.<sup>63</sup> Newspaper supplements and inserts paid for by *China Daily*, an outlet that closely follows the CCP's line on current events, is carried by several major European newspapers. In other instances, Chinese SOEs are attempting to outright purchase media institutions in Europe. CEFC China Energy, in particular, has made major investments in Central European media outlets. This development is driving some countries, including Germany, to enhance its screening mechanisms of foreign investments in critical industries, including the media.

China's approach to shaping the information environment is different than Russia's, in that China tends to deny access to information while Russia seeks to flood social media with coordinated inauthentic tactics. However, China appears poised to take a page out of Russia's disinformation playbook. As pro-

democracy protests continue to rile the streets of Hong Kong, China has sought to manipulate discourse on the protests globally. Facebook and Twitter reported that accounts originating in China acted in coordination to portray the Hong Kong protestors as extreme, even likening them to ISIS fighters, prompting Twitter to suspend over 900 accounts originating from mainland China.<sup>64</sup> Chinese actors also attempted to influence discourse on the Hong Kong protests in the United States. When the general manager of an NBA team issued a supportive tweet for the protestors in October 2019, outcry among Chinese sponsors, media outlets, and basketball officials caused him to quickly delete the statement and issue an apology.<sup>65</sup>

China has also consistently sought to manipulate the media environment in Taiwan to enhance views of mainland China. These efforts all have the same aim: to clamp down on open debate and free speech that might weaken the legitimacy of China's authoritarian government at home and abroad. As previous examples have shown, Beijing's efforts nearby might help to predict future actions farther afield.

### **Cyberattacks**

Chinese actors carry out constant cyberattacks on European governments and companies. The primary goal is to gain access to trade secrets and intellectual property in technological and other critical industries. Cyber security firms report that Chinese espionage groups typically target construction, engineering, aerospace, telecom firms, and governments around the world—including in the United States and Europe—in order to acquire military and intelligence information.<sup>66</sup> Germany-based cyber security firm NTT Security reported in 2018 that 67 percent of attacks targeting the manufacturing sector of companies operating in Europe, the Middle East, and Africa (EMEA) came from China, up exponentially from 3 percent of all attacks in 2016.<sup>67</sup>

The heightened frequency of Chinese cyberattacks is prompting governments to warn companies about the growing risk of Chinese cyber-espionage. In 2017, German intelligence agencies accused China of creating fake LinkedIn accounts to gain access to more than 10,000 German citizens, including government officials and politicians.<sup>68</sup> In December 2018, the United States and United Kingdom accused Chinese hackers in a group known as “the advanced persistent threat group 10” (APT10) of widespread cyber intrusion into critical industries including aviation, space, and satellite technology in both countries and in several European countries including Sweden, Finland, France, and Switzerland.<sup>69</sup>

This growing list of grievances is influencing an ongoing political debate among European policymakers over whether Chinese telecom company Huawei should be permitted to build out Europe's next-generation 5G networks. Germany

decided in October 2019 that it would not ban Huawei from playing a role in its 5G networks, and other EU member states including France and the UK have yet to make a firm decision. Critics argue, however, that it would be unwise to let the company serve as a potential “backdoor” for the Chinese government to carry out future espionage and cyber intrusions. They cite the 2017 National Intelligence Law in China as evidence that Huawei, even as a private company, could be forced by the Chinese government to provide information when demanded.<sup>70</sup> Companies such as Huawei may not appear to pose a direct threat to democratic institutions, but the CCP’s heavy-handed control over state-owned and private sector companies creates serious risks to privacy and intellectual property rights.

### Putting the Pieces Together

These distinct channels of Russian and Chinese influence—economic, political, and technological—stem from the same existential goal: to maintain internal regime security. The Russian and Chinese governments see efforts to promote

**A deepening of the Russia-China relationship could pose additional challenges for European states.**

democracy and civil society within their borders as threats to preserving internal stability that must be dealt with expediently.<sup>71</sup>

But regime efforts to undermine democratic movements are not confined to their home turf. To lessen democracy’s appeal and hinder the West’s ability to support democratic progress, they must also weaken democratic societies abroad.

Given this shared outlook, there is growing debate over whether Russia and China are forming a strategic partnership to pursue

such goals. The standing assumption among many analysts has been that long-term distrust and conflicting interests will inhibit closer ties between the two countries.<sup>72</sup> Others, however, highlight signs of deepening political, military, and economic ties driven by Presidents Putin and Xi.<sup>73</sup> A deepening of the Russia-China relationship could pose additional challenges for individual European states and institutions including NATO and the EU. For example, China could use its ownership of European ports to slow a NATO response to Russian aggression or use its economic leverage to dissuade a weakly-democratic member state such as Hungary or Turkey to blunt its pushback.<sup>74</sup> NATO’s commitment to collective defense thus eroded, Russia might be emboldened to deepen its use of hybrid tactics in Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania.

Regardless of whether Russia and China cooperate intentionally or explicitly, their respective efforts are mutually reinforcing. Russia's interference in democratic elections and injection of malign finance depresses public trust in democratic governments. China's strong economic model and authoritarian political system offer European countries an alternative to the political West's liberal democratic model.<sup>75</sup> Because they have multiple targets in common—transatlantic unity, European cohesion, and institutions—Russia's and China's activities in Europe have a stronger effect in parallel than either would alone.

These collective efforts are exploiting Europe's vulnerabilities. For Moscow, important European vulnerabilities include a dependence on Russian energy, a patchwork anti-money laundering regime, weak and varied campaign finance laws, corruption, partisan polarization, and low trust in institutions. For Beijing, they include a growing dependence on Chinese investment, the allure of China's market for European companies, inconsistent and weak foreign investment screening mechanisms, and a lack of widespread knowledge about China. As European policymakers chart a course forward, closing these vulnerabilities wherever possible will be critical.

Finally, Moscow and Beijing are using multiple tools in combination or concurrently. Russia injects money into political systems and fuels political subversion in European societies. Information operations and cyberattacks go hand in hand with dark money maneuvers to bolster the fortunes of illiberal populists. China, while not as direct in its efforts, pursues parallel channels of influence to the same effect. Chinese investments soften what could be stronger European resistance to CCP human rights abuses as well as policies of aggression and coercion in the Asia Pacific. Cyberattacks steal intellectual property and intelligence from European companies and governments while information operations hinder open debate and free speech on Chinese policies. It is therefore incumbent on European policymakers not to look at any one vector in isolation. That will be a challenge for both national governments and European institutions more broadly, which are often not organized in a manner conducive to addressing the challenge holistically.

In the years ahead, effective counterstrategies to these channels of authoritarian influence will demand a more cohesive and strategic response from Europe. But to defend democratic institutions and values at home, European policymakers and the public must first cut through the myriad of Russia's and China's distinct economic, political, information, and cyber tools of engagement to see the cumulative and detrimental effects they are having on European democracy.

## Notes

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