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[The Fight for Democracy](#)

# A New Era of Competition

The Growing Threat from Authoritarian  
Internationalism as a Global Challenge to Democracy

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With the benefit of hindsight, it is clear that democracies long failed to realize that a new era of competition was underway between autocratic and democratic states. Such competition is visible in a number of spheres, including geopolitics. But it is massive investments in their own autocratic forms of “soft power” that have enabled regimes in Russia and China to make dramatic inroads in challenging the integrity and prestige of the democratic systems of the West.

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Following a period of remarkable success for democracy after the Cold War, the tide has turned. Around the world, powerful anti-democratic forces have taken the initiative. In recent years, formidable state and non-state actors alike have gained momentum, seized the advantage, and sought to undermine liberal democracy.

The forces working against democracy are not limited to any single country or region but instead have multiple sources. First among these is a group of influential and ambitious authoritarian states that have organized themselves to directly contest democratic development and ideals. Regimes in Russia, China, Iran, and elsewhere are devoting vast resources and a good deal of thought to making the world more agreeable to their interests, which favor governance systems based on the monopolization of politics and state control. Another way of looking at this is that trendsetting authoritarian powers have made a priority of containing democracy, applying a twist to the ideas expressed in George Kennan’s “X-Article” that argued for a policy of containment to combat the spread of Soviet influence.<sup>1</sup>

To achieve their aims, these regimes are swiftly adapting, learning from one another, and sharing know-how and technology. They not only repress reform-minded voices at home but today are determinedly working to reshape the political operating environment beyond their borders. Given the resilience exhibited by the authoritarians so far, it would be inadvisable for the

democracies to underestimate the threat these predatory, corrupt regimes pose to the global political order.<sup>2</sup>

At the same time, illiberal non-state actors, including ISIS and other Islamist extremist groups, are pursuing a complex, global strategy to disrupt the current political order. Democrats are front-line targets of these radical groups, whose violent vision and actions pose a threat to the governance structures in settings that have already been made fragile by decades of authoritarian misrule, including many countries in the Middle East and Africa.

The wider erosion of democracy is also visible in countries that not long ago were seen as democratic hopefuls. The swift decline in democratic accountability in countries as diverse as Turkey, the Philippines, Hungary, South Africa, Bangladesh, and Tanzania is indicative of the global scope of what could be called a spreading “authoritarian virus”.

Taken together, the forces working against democracy are more powerful than at any time since the end of the Cold War. In taking the initiative against democracy, authoritarians have shown a clear ability to learn and improve their methods of repression and manipulation, both at home and abroad. Leading authoritarian regimes devote extraordinary resources to advancing their preferred worldview and interests – through international media outlets, the development of powerful state-backed digital capabilities, state-friendly policy institutes, and

cultural outreach – something that has been underappreciated by the democracies. An estimate of China’s current annual investment in international information activities, for example, is seven to ten billion U.S. dollars,<sup>3</sup> which may not reflect the true scope of the resources the Chinese state devotes to such purposes. Given the extent of the shift in the balance of influence away from Europe and the United States in recent years, it will be critically important for the leading democratic states to seriously rethink the passive approach they have taken to safeguarding and defending democratic ideals and interests.

### **The Projection of Authoritarian Influence**

By their nature, authoritarian regimes deny space for moderate political voices that could offer a viable alternative to existing policies and leaders. Authoritarian leadership has no interest in relinquishing power, especially given the massive unchecked corruption that transforms politics in authoritarian regimes into a brutal zero-sum game. In settings in which accountable and transparent institutions are absent, state corruption invariably grows deep and powerful roots. It is no coincidence that state capture and kleptocracy have taken hold in Russia, China, Azerbaijan, Angola, and other countries.

**For a decade now, authoritarian regimes have become increasingly more repressive.**

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Meanwhile, reform-minded political figures, activists, and independent organizations are in the crosshairs to a degree not seen since the Cold War. For more than a decade now, already repressive regimes have become even more so. A large share of the declines assessed by Freedom House over this period have occurred in countries already classified as “Not Free,” including such influential states as China, Russia, Saudi Arabia, and Iran. Under these harshly repressive

conditions, the law is used as an instrument by ruling parties that devote their energies to retaining political dominance at all costs, rather than as a dispassionate guide for setting forth the rules of the game. State-dominated media in these settings are employed to discredit opposition voices, to prevent meaningful scrutiny of the policies and actions of incumbent powers, and more generally, to create a parallel reality for audiences. In the Middle East, Eurasia, and Africa, this sort of political manipulation and marginalization of moderate voices can lock societies into dangerous cycles of extremism, a state of affairs already apparent in so many unfree societies. Given the ongoing marginalization, and even extinguishing of independent institutions and alternative elites, these states will find it dramatically more difficult to reform if their authoritarian leadership should fall.

As the autocratic leadership systematically degrades the independent human and organizational capital within their borders, there is also a corrosive international dimension to such deepening authoritarianism. This is due to the fact that these increasingly internationalist regimes, led by those in Moscow and Beijing, are reshaping the political environment beyond their borders in ways that are at odds with the interests and ideals of the democracies. The effort takes a number of forms, including the targeting of critical democratic institutions such as the media and elections. The manner by which diverse authoritarian regimes counter democracy can vary. Russia takes an antagonistic and combative stance, as does, for instance, the leadership in Iran and Venezuela. The Chinese government takes a more nuanced approach to curbing the development of democracy, although it has become increasingly active in this regard since Xi Jinping has assumed the role of China’s paramount leader.

### *Undermining Democratic Institutions and Norms*

Regional and international rules-based bodies are seen as a threat by authoritarian regimes, which target the human rights and democracy components of the institutions that are critical





Propaganda 1.0: In the past it was set in stone, but today, interpreting historical events is increasingly battled out on the Internet. Source: © Gleb Garanich, Reuters.

for safeguarding democratic standards. Russia, Azerbaijan, and Kazakhstan, for example, have sought to limit the human rights and democracy initiatives of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) by curbing its budget and subverting genuine election monitoring, often by promoting “zombie” election observers who sanction fraudulent votes.<sup>4</sup> The OSCE’s Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) has been a consistent target of the authoritarian regimes that are among the 57 OSCE member states. The

Council of Europe, especially its Parliamentary Assembly, also has been the target of efforts to undermine its integrity when it comes to its democracy and human rights activities.<sup>5</sup> Venezuela and allied Latin American countries like Ecuador and Bolivia have sought to neutralize the democracy-related work of the Organization of American States and its Inter-American Commission on Human Rights.

These regimes are also building a set of authoritarian groups such as the Shanghai Cooperation

Organization (SCO), the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), and the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) that seek to institutionalize authoritarian preferences expressed through norms of sovereignty, non-interference, and state dominance. In the Middle East context, Saudi Arabia has effectively pursued what scholar Frederic Wehrey calls an approach of “political quietism,” devoting enormous political and economic resources to smother any form of meaningful political reform in the region.<sup>6</sup> This is a component of regional strategies that utilize associations at the regional level to reinforce domestic repression by helping regimes share techniques of political control, exchange dissident “watch lists,” and promote agreements for the forcible *refoulement* of exiles and refugees who are labeled terrorists.

A crucial case in point is the competition over the rules and norms that will govern cyberspace. In this sphere, the authoritarian regimes operate in unison, arguing that the internet should be controlled by governments, while seeking to exclude private business, civil society, and any other non-state participants from decision-making. This line of attack on the international level is a natural outgrowth of authoritarians’ domestic suppression of independent voices and institutions of any sort.

Arguing on behalf of “Internet sovereignty” and multilateral (rather than multistakeholder) Internet governance, authoritarian regimes are single-mindedly working to neutralize democratic discourse and to limit independent voices in cyberspace. Repressive governments now routinely work to apply restrictive local standards to platforms such as Google, Facebook, and YouTube, with the aim of constraining the free flow of independent information. The pursuit of greater control over the Internet is not only taking place at the most high-profile intergovernmental bodies such as the International Telecommunication Union, Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers, and the Internet Assigned Numbers Authority, but also at the regional level, where China, Russia, and Saudi Arabia are using bodies such as the SCO and GCC to this end.

While the Edward Snowden disclosures have focused attention on the U.S. National Security Agency’s extensive surveillance apparatus, Russia and China have developed their own far-reaching surveillance systems, which operate outside the rule of law and without any meaningful accountability or transparency. In Russia, the System of Operative-Investigative Measures (SORM), a national system for the interception of all electronic communications, is used by the FSB (the successor agency to the KGB) to collect, analyze, and store all data transmitted or received on Russian networks, including phone calls, website visits, and e-mail. Russia’s Central Asian neighbors have also adopted illiberal SORM standards, and it seems apparent that these democracy-unfriendly cyber norms will spread further still in the region. The governments of China and Iran, for their part, have developed some of the world’s most repressive techniques for the manipulation and control of cyberspace. The ongoing effort to reshape the norms for cyberspace toward authoritarian preferences is simply one piece of a larger effort to influence the global media space.

### *Subverting the Media Space*

Because these regimes understand the importance of information and ideas, they have built a formidable media infrastructure that is designed to systematically discredit – and delegitimize – civil society in the eyes of the wider public. They have also invested in international media enterprises that enable them to project messages globally about their own achievements and the alleged failures and decadence of Western societies. Media conglomerates such as Russia’s RT and China’s CGTN (until 2017 CCTV) devote much of their worldwide programming to questioning and assailing the West and the idea of democracy. In today’s fragmented world of media, authoritarian regimes have learned to use modern media to their advantage. They are investing heavily and exploiting the opportunities offered by the new media environment to sow confusion and distrust.

With the benefit of hindsight, it is now apparent that the democracies long failed to realize that

a new era of competition was underway between autocratic and democratic states. Such competition is visible in a growing number of spheres, including geopolitics. In recent years, Russia has flexed its muscles with greater frequency, using its military in Georgia, Ukraine, and Syria. China has taken an increasingly tough posture in the South China Sea. Iran, along with Russia, has served as Bashar al Assad's crucial lifeline in Syria.

Massive investments in modern (non-kinetic) influence instruments, however, have enabled these regimes to make especially significant inroads. China, Russia, and Iran in particular invest billions of dollars in their own forms of "soft power" and "public diplomacy". Such investments have often been misunderstood by analysts in the West, who believe they are aimed solely at improving the image of these countries. While some decision makers in Beijing, Moscow, and Tehran may be seeking to improve their repressive regimes' image in the world, this is a tall order, given the extent of corruption, brutality, and mismanagement found in each of these countries.

Over time, it has become clear that the authoritarians are aiming at challenging the integrity and prestige of the democratic systems of the West. Russia in particular seeks to undermine the democracies from within. The "Lisa Affair" in Germany, the story of a 13-year-old Russian-German girl who was allegedly sexually assaulted in January 2016 by a group of immigrants in Berlin, is emblematic of Russia's playbook. This story was not true; it was a creation from the alternate universe of Russian media. It was first reported on a minor website for Russian expatriates in Germany and then broadcast by the Kremlin's Channel One, which is viewed by many of Germany's four million Russian speakers. With the backing of the Kremlin's state propaganda machinery, the story grew into a much larger challenge to Germany's political system. While most observers believe this effort at manipulation by the Russian authorities backfired, the "Lisa Affair" nevertheless provides a troubling example of the projection of authoritarian influence into the democratic space.

The effort revealed the multidimensional nature of Russia's approach: Moscow's state-backed digital and traditional media are used to inject information into the public domain; state-backed front organizations, often referred to as "GONGOs" (government organized non-governmental organizations), seek to cause confusion, and other surrogates are used to manipulate political discourse. Russia stands out for its toxic use of "soft power," but other authoritarian regimes also are developing their media and other tools of influence for international application.

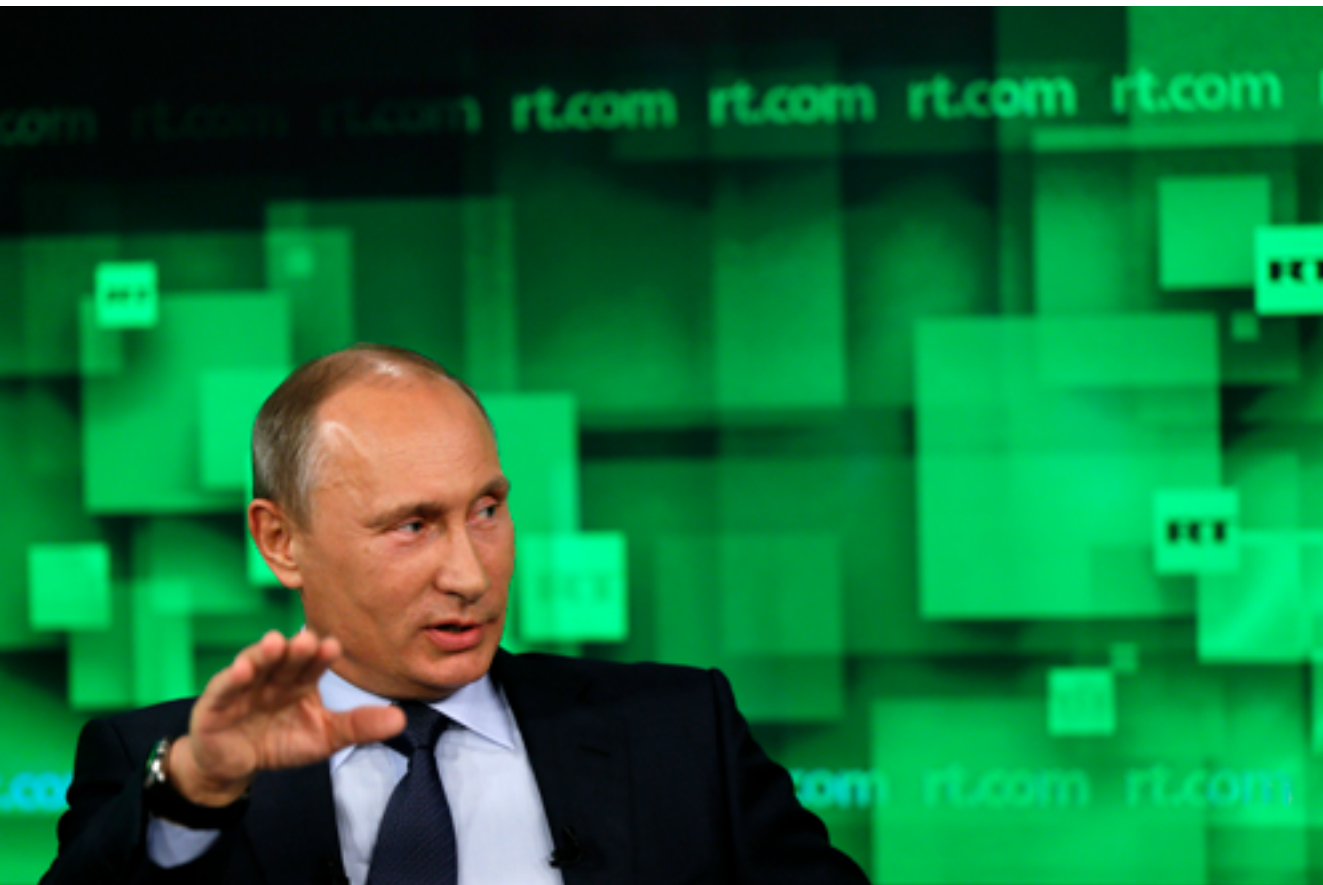
### **Authoritarian regimes invest heavily to challenge the integrity of Western democratic values.**

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The Russian effort to exert influence in the public sphere is not solely devoted to creating confusion, however. Several key themes underlie the array of information that Russia either overtly or surreptitiously supports. Russian-backed messaging systematically focuses on such themes as moral decay within Europe, NATO hostility toward Russia, the impending collapse of the West, and the fallibility of liberal democracy. Objective and independent media outlets are often depicted as untrustworthy, and Ukraine in the aftermath of the EuroMaidan is cynically portrayed either as a fascist or failing state.

As the sophistication of Russia's manipulation and disinformation campaigns has evolved, they are increasingly aimed at the electoral processes of democratic systems. Precisely because the election process in democracies is open and competitive, and outcomes can be close, elections are vulnerable to outside interference. This is especially the case in the digital age, and Russia has developed its capacity to exploit such vulnerability.

Policy makers on both sides of the Atlantic have noted that Russia actively meddled in



Russia today: Via its own media and information channels, Vladimir Putin's regime seeks to influence and manipulate global public opinion. Source: © POOL New, Reuters.

France's recent election. Shortly in advance of the May 7 runoff between presidential candidates Emmanuel Macron and Marine Le Pen, a massive hack bearing the hallmarks of a Kremlin cyber disruption operation targeted the Macron campaign. For her part, Marine Le Pen has taken an openly pro-Moscow stance. Her National Front Party in 2014 took a multi-million Euro loan from the Moscow-based First Czech Russian Bank. Similar concerns have been voiced with regard to Germany's Bundestag elections slated for September 2017. German *Bundeskanzlerin* Angela Merkel already has been subjected to a fearsome campaign of false stories and conspiracy theories generated by fringe websites that have apparent links to Russian state disinformation.<sup>7</sup>

The authoritarians are exerting influence across a wide range of countries, including in the established democracies. The United States is contending with the challenges to free expression and academic integrity presented by Chinese state-funded Confucius Institutes,<sup>8</sup> as well as the pollution of the information space by an array of Russian and Chinese state-backed media. Established democracies within the European Union are likewise facing an onslaught of Russian initiatives in the arenas of media, culture, and politics. China's influence in the realm of ideas is growing in Europe, too, along with its expanding economic and commercial activities.

But Russia, as well as China and Iran, have taken their efforts a step further. Today, new forms of influence are evident in Latin America, Africa,

and Europe, settings where political relationships and alliances are more actively contested in the new environment. The authoritarians invest heavily in international media, policy outlets, and cyber instruments because they appreciate that it is in this space where ideas take hold and today's political battles are fought and won.

As part of this new global competition, the authoritarians are placing particular emphasis on regions where young, weak, or partial democracies predominate and where democratic standards and values are being actively contested. Russia's rapid scaling up of influence in the EU member states of Central Europe has caught policy makers by surprise. Russia is increasingly active in the Balkans as well. China has similarly built up its influence in Latin America and Africa, coordinating its large economic investments there with wide-ranging initiatives in media, culture, and education. Beijing, through its "16+1" initiative, is quickly deepening its economic and political engagement with eleven EU member states and five countries in the Balkans.<sup>9</sup>

#### *Interests Are Animated by Political Preferences*

China, Iran, and Russia of course pursue their own interests. But the direction taken by these regimes in the spheres of media, human rights, and international institutions is a stark reminder that such interests are animated by authoritarian political preferences, which privilege state dominance above all else. This is clear from the way the regimes in Beijing, Tehran, and Moscow treat their own media and civil society. In an era of globalization, ambitious regimes that play by their own corrupt and predatory rules at home seek to shift the goalposts toward authoritarian preferences internationally. This authoritarian ambition to reshape the international playing field is in turn highly relevant to the interests of the democracies in Europe, including Germany, as well as to the United States.

#### **Reckoning with the New Environment**

The sharp growth in authoritarian influence comes at a time when the European Union and

United States are scaling back their own ambitions with regard to supporting democracy and the ideals underlying it. Increasingly, the leading authoritarian regimes show solidarity and coordination with one another, at least when it comes to limiting the spread of democracy. The challenge presented by the regimes in Moscow, Beijing, and Tehran is being taken to an entirely new level by virtue of their projection of influence beyond their own national borders.

A perception is now taking hold that raises doubts about the global balance of power, and we may be approaching a tipping point at which the balance shifts toward authoritarian forces. If such a swing in the balance were to occur, it would dramatically change the world we live in into one that would no doubt be more corrupt, unstable, and hostile to the interests of EU members, as well as the United States. The new competition from the forces hostile to democracy requires a more serious, concerted, longer-term response.

Given the potent forces now challenging democracy, a status quo approach will not suffice. If current trends continue, they will seriously jeopardize the liberal order in which the democracies have invested so much. Today, a determined effort is urgently needed to reclaim the initiative by defending democratic institutions and norms, safeguarding the media space, and supporting moderate, reform-minded voices. Such a response should include:

1. *Affirming democratic ideals and standards* as part of a dedicated effort to effectively compete with authoritarian power projection in the sphere of ideas. The leading democracies must explain their ideals and put down clear markers regarding their standards – or else others will continue to do this instead of the democracies. Autocratic regimes are investing hundreds of millions of dollars in their international media infrastructure, while learning and modernizing their capacity to advance authoritarian views and interests. The democracies ignore this disparity and the challenge it presents at their peril, and must





Behind the scenes: The People's Republic of China is far away from "net freedom". Not without reason, it is instead often talked about as the Great Firewall of China. [Source: © Aly Song, Reuters.](#)

make a far more serious commitment to supporting independent journalism and modernized international broadcasting efforts that transmit independent news and information to unfree societies.

2. *Reinvigorating the democracy and human rights functions of key organizations*, including the OSCE and the Council of Europe. Over the past decade, autocratic regimes have made a concerted effort to hollow out such institutions. The democracies that are members of the OSCE and the Council of Europe must take democracy into account

at least as much as the autocrats prioritize autocracy in their own regional organizations such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organizations and the Gulf Cooperation Council. This challenge is increasingly relevant for the defense of Internet freedom and standards, a sphere in which autocrats' interests are aligned and where the regimes in Beijing, Moscow, Tehran, and Riyadh are seeking to institutionalize authoritarian norms.

3. *Cultivating counterweights* to address the regional impact of Russia, China, and Iran, which are projecting power in neighboring

countries (as well as farther afield). In addition to supporting the reform efforts of those who seek to help themselves within the authoritarian trendsetter countries of Russia, China, and Iran, work in places such as Iraq, Lebanon, Yemen, and Afghanistan to provide help to actors and institutions that offer an alternative to groups that Iran uses to project its influence in the region. Support independent organizations and people in countries in close geographic proximity to Russia in order to ensure that alternatives and positive demonstration effects can emerge as a counterweight to Russia's closed, corrupt, and increasingly expansionist regime.

4. *Inoculating democratic societies* from the malign influence of increasingly sophisticated foreign forces. The democracies have grossly underestimated the national security threat posed by the authoritarians' export of manipulated media, cyber subversion, and various forms of corruption, including transnational networked kleptocracy. A serious and comprehensive response to this multi-front challenge is required. It must include initiatives for education at the mass and elite levels; systemic efforts to safeguard democratic societies from the ever-adapting forms of cyber pollution and subversion; and a much clearer understanding of the threat to the democracies of modern kleptocracy, which is integrally linked to autocratic governance systems.

The phenomenon of authoritarian internationalism has not emerged overnight. It has built momentum over a period of years. But it is clear now that the autocrats' growing ambitions present a significant strategic vulnerability to democracy. It is for this reason that the democracies will need to devise a more grounded, longer-term response if they are to take up and prevail in the face of this serious, multifaceted challenge.

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- 1 Cf. Walker, Christopher 2015: The New Containment: Undermining Democracy, *World Affairs*, 178:1, pp. 42-51.
- 2 Cf. Diamond, Larry / Plattner, Marc F. / Walker, Christopher 2016: Authoritarianism goes global: The challenge to democracy, pp. 3-19.
- 3 Cf. Brady, Anne-Marie 2015: China's Foreign Propaganda Machine, *Journal of Democracy* 26:4, pp. 51-59.
- 4 Cf. Walker, Christopher / Cooley, Alexander 2013: Vote of the Living Dead, *Foreign Policy.com*, 31 Oct 2013, in: <http://atfp.co/2rPx6Gk> [13 May 2017].
- 5 Cf. Freedom Files Analytical Center 2017: European Values Bought and Sold: An Exploration into Azerbaijan's Sophisticated System of Projecting its International Influence, Buying Western Politicians and Capturing Intergovernmental Organizations, in: <http://bit.ly/2sGuLxm> [13 May 2017].
- 6 Cf. Wehrey, Frederic 2015: Saudi Arabia's Anxious Autocrats, *Journal of Democracy*, 26:2, pp. 71-85.
- 7 Cf. Nardelli, Alberto / Silverman, Craig 2017: Hyperpartisan Sites and Facebook Pages are Publishing False Stories and Conspiracy Theories About Angela Merkel, *Buzzfeed*, 14 Jan 2017, in: <http://bzfd.it/2rYE12c> [13 May 2017].
- 8 Cf. Peterson, Rachele 2017: Outsourced to China: Confucius Institutes and Soft Power in American Higher Education, *The National Association of Scholars*, New York.
- 9 The 16 countries are: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Macedonia, Montenegro, Poland, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia, and Slovenia.