Foreign Influence by Authoritarian Governments: Introducing New Data and Evidence*

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Policymakers are increasingly concerned about the revival of superpower conflict. Increased competition among great powers has been especially evident in the exercise of foreign influence, where Russia and China have increased their efforts to influence less powerful nations. To date, the absence of quantitative data has limited systematic investigation of this resurgence of authoritarian influence activity. We introduce a new, country-month dataset tracking reports of influence by Russia and China in 62 aid-receiving countries from 2012 through 2024. We construct the data by applying large langauage models (LLMs) to an original corpus of more than 100 million news articles sourced from high-quality, domestic news sources and use it to describe trends in influence activity over time and across countries. Finally, we exploit the unique features of the data to test hypotheses about Russian influence activity in the months before the invasion of Ukraine. We document a dramatic increase in the use of diplomacy, economic power, and hard power before the invasion. In doing so, we show that this data is useful for both theory testing and foreign policy decision-making.

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Introduction

The third wave of democratization was accompanied by a spectacular decline in the international influence of authoritarian governments. Culminating with the collapse of the Soviet Union, the ascendance of advanced democracies resulted in pressure on smaller and poorer countries to liberalize both their economies and their political systems. However, the last 15 years has seen the most powerful non-democracies become both more autocratic and more assertive in their foreign policies (Diamond 2020). This has included increased attempts by Russia and China to influence political outcomes in less powerful nations and secure strategic partnerships. Over this period, scholars and policymakers have voiced concerns about a resurgence of authoritarian influence, which have motivated high-level decision-making in foreign policy and major investments by Western country governments in strengthening ties with strategically important countries.

More aggressive foreign policy by Russia and China is happening amidst growing concerns about a "new Cold War" between Western democracies and the "new axis" coalition (Sanger 2024; The White House 2017; Evans and Stark 2019). Despite the importance of these issues for foreign policy, the paucity of quantitative data on foreign influence has limited systematic investigation. Assembling data on foreign influence activity is difficult due to the absence of publicly available administrative data in both influencing countries and countries targeted for influence (which we refer to as 'target countries'). Furthermore, while major events like military confrontations or trade agreements are covered widely in the international press, less dramatic events are rarely reported by media outside target countries.

In this paper, we introduce the *Resurgent Authoritarian Influence (RAI)* dataset. This dataset tracks monthly reporting on a broad range of 22 distinct events that are indicative of foreign influence across 62 developing countries from 2012 through 2024. To create this data, we apply a fine-tuned large language model (LLM) to a novel corpus of news articles published by more than 350 high-quality media outlets, most of them published domestically, across 62 developing countries in nearly 40 languages. Using this approach, we capture monthly variation in news coverage of each of our 22 event categories, allowing us to detect a wide variety of foreign influence events at unparalleled frequency. Furthermore, our research infrastructure allows us to update the entire dataset every 90 days, ensuring the utility of *RAI* for studying current events as well as medium-term patterns and trends.

This paper proceeds in three parts. First, we introduce the *RAI* dataset. We briefly describe the *High-Quality Media from Aid Receiving Countries (HQMARC)* on which the *RAI* dataset is built and *HQMARC's* advantages over other sources of media data. We also give an overview of the open-source computational tools used to translate and extract information from each article, providing a roadmap for scholars looking to apply similar tools at a large scale. Second, we use the *RAI* data to study patterns in Russian and Chinese foreign influence. We describe how Russia and China have changed both their geographic targeting of influence and the specific tools that they use. Specifically, we show that diplomacy and the exercise of hard power constitute a growing share of Russia's influence efforts, even as China has consistently relied on economic influence in target countries. We also show that Russia has dramatically expanded the geographic scope of influence operations in recent years, while China's efforts have remained stable.

Finally, we provide an important use case by examining Russia's foreign behavior in target countries around its invasion of Ukraine. First, we draw on international political economy and foreign policy research to derive expectations about how Russia may have changed its foreign influence behavior