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The Authoritarian Resurgence

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The Authoritarian Resurgence

Attentive readers of this journal will have already noticed that NED's International Forum for Democratic Studies is engaged in a study of what we have variously labeled the "world movement against democracy" or the "authoritarian resurgence." This project is divided into two parts—one focusing on the countries that have been leading this resurgence, and a second examining some of the key "soft-power" arenas in which they have been seeking to weaken democracy.

The first article generated by this project, Andrew J. Nathan on "China's Challenge," appeared in our January 2015 issue. In the pages that follow, we offer readers essays on four other major authoritarian countries—Russia, Venezuela, Iran, and Saudi Arabia—that are seeking both to gain ascendancy in their respective regions and to undercut the rules-based institutions that have been instrumental in setting global democratic norms.

These regimes may disagree on many things, but they share the objective of obstructing the advance of democracy and weakening the influence of democratic principles in the world.

Lilia Shevtsova analyzes the transformation of Russia's kleptocratic regime into something far more belligerent and dangerous, and explains how Vladimir Putin's new foreign policy is raising the stakes and reshaping the landscape in Europe and Eurasia.

Javier Corrales shows that Venezuela under Hugo Chávez's successor Nicolás Maduro has seen a "turn toward greater autocracy."

Abbas Milani evaluates the underpinnings of the clerical authoritarian regime in Iran, and in a companion piece Alex Vatanka looks at how Tehran is actively projecting its influence throughout its neighborhood.

Frederic Wehrey examines Saudi Arabia, Iran's great regional rival, and the negative impact of Saudi policies on democracy.

Over the past decade, these regimes have proven adept at refining their techniques of repression and control. But all four of them have been buoyed by high oil revenues, and it remains to be seen how they will fare if the price of oil remains at sharply lower levels over an extended period of time.

The authors of these essays explain the threat posed by these resurgent authoritarians, but also identify their inherent political and economic weaknesses, including rampant corruption. The established democracies have been slow to recognize the increasingly determined challenge from today's authoritarians, perhaps because they hope that these regimes will be undone by their flaws. But given the resilience that the authoritarians have displayed so far, it would be rash for the democracies to underestimate the seriousness of the dangers that they pose.

—Christopher Walker and the Editors