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The Tools of Autocracy Worldwide: authoritarian networks, the façade of democracy, and neo-repression¹

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ABSTRACT

This special double issue identifies the tools and conditions that allow (re)emerging autocrats to undermine democratic traditions and constrain civil rights across the world. In our introduction, we posit that identifying the tools of the established, emerging, and aspiring authoritarians in today's world is vital, theoretically and practically. It allows us to identify common denominators across specific contexts to advance knowledge about the features and risks that authoritarian regimes pose today. It also permits us to reveal the inter-state and transnational expert networks through which autocrats share strategies, information, and resources to remain in power. Through a global and comparative lens, we thematically organize the articles' key findings. The articles reveal novel tools of authoritarianism by showing how (re)emerging autocrats control media to manipulate public perceptions and delegitimize opponents and critics, seek to maintain the legitimacy of a democratic rule by aligning with "grassroots" social movements composed of extremists and hate organized groups, redefine the meaning of democracy, and use a range of repressive methods domestically and abroad. This special issue also captures variation in the successful deployment of autocratic tools as authors propose arguments that caution against equating conditions across different autocratic regimes. We bookend the special issue with a brief reflection on populism on the left and right and what it means for the main themes of the special issue.

INTRODUCTION

The boundary between democracy and authoritarianism is increasingly blurry. Across the world, existing and a new breed of emergent, reemerging, and aspirational autocrats is undermining liberal democratic institutions while crafting a façade of working within the bounds of democracy. As of 2021, of the 104 democracies worldwide, 37 had experienced moderate to severe contraction (International IDEA, 2022: 5). These include democratic contractions in civil liberties, civic participation, state administration's predictable implementation of the laws, and limited corruption, open elections, and checks-and-balances between branches of government (International IDEA, 2022: 5). The democratic erosion began intensifying in the 2010s, quickly accelerating since 2016 (International IDEA, 2022). Significantly, it is not only that these autocrats are using democratic strategies to attain and retain power, but that they use the very democratic institutions that they seek to deteriorate, which characterizes what Lührmann and Lindberg (2019) refer to as "third wave autocratization."

Although liberal democratic leaders publicly condemn long-standing and emerging autocrats, in practice, they have little qualms about collaborating with them when such relationships advance their geopolitical interests (Erlanger, 2022). For

example, U.S. officials frame their opposition to Russia's invasion of Ukraine as a fight between democracy and authoritarianism, even though the United States and its European allies simultaneously had to compromise with Hungarian autocrat Viktor Orbán to send Ukraine aid (Stavis-Gridneff, Pronczuk and Horowitz, 2024) and are beholden to providing his country military protection if attacked because Hungary is a member of the NATO alliance (Erlanger, 2022). Similarly in Honduras, between 2009 (the year of the U.S.-backed coup d'état that ousted President Zelaya) and 2024, U.S. administrations supported President Juan Orlando Hernández, the destruction of the rule of law in the country, and his narco-dictatorship (Frank, 2018; Fox, 2024). U.S. officials ignored his ties to organized crime and autocratic tendencies because this autocrat helped advance U.S. and Canadian foreign interests in trade, containing U.S.-bound migration through Honduras, and (presumably) the war on drugs (Frank, 2018; Fox, 2024). It was only when President Hernández lost his re-election bid in 2022 and became a useless ally that U.S. officials extradited him, publicly recognized his ties with narcotraffic, and charged him with conspiring to traffic drugs while in office—his trial entirely omits how the United States was complicit and supported his rule (Fox 2024).

The rising world order blurs the lines of a democracy versus autocracy binary. Given this messiness and the emergence of these regimes across the globe, we find it urgent to understand how today's (re)emerging and aspirational autocrats attain and maintain power. This knowledge can empower us to effectively counter the new authoritarianism, making us more informed and prepared.

The contributions to this special double issue reveal key features of how autocrats capture and maintain power in today's era of general democratic advances: (re)emerging autocrats deploy principles of liberal democracy while simultaneously chipping away at these very components. (Re)emerging autocrats maintain an allure of democracy via three overarching strategies: (1) the building of charismatic authority via the mass media, (2) authoritarian legalism, and (3) the fluidity between autocracy and democracy. (Re)emerging authoritarians control and manipulate media platforms to spread misinformation and propaganda, to delegitimize and often dehumanize critics and opponents, and to portray themselves as strong saviors of the nation (Ben-Ghiat, 2021; Matovski, 2022; Guriev and Treisman, 2022). The resulting media content amplifies their charismatic authority (Ibid). Aspirational autocrats keep a close eye on all these strategies to adopt and adapt those that best fit their conditions.

For instance, instead of resorting to blatant electoral fraud or coups, present-day autocrats rig elections through legislative maneuvers to maintain a façade of democracy and ensure their rule retains some legitimacy (Brancati, 2014; Scheppele, 2018; Guriev and Treisman, 2022). Most notably, (re)emerging autocrats reshape legal structures to maintain power—what is known as authoritarian legalism (Varol, 2013; Scheppele, 2018). They corrupt liberal democratic institutions by rewriting constitutions, undermining independent judiciaries, manipulating elections,² replacing career civil servants with loyalists, and eroding checks and balances to stay in power (Varol, 2013; Scheppele, 2018; Corrales, 2023). Indeed, the very institutions and procedures created through democratic processes often facilitate the rise of autocratic regimes. Legal tools give autocratic regimes an air of democracy, making it difficult to classify them through a binary of dictatorship versus autocracy. Hence, a robust body of literature has examined how the line between non-democratic and democratic regimes has been blurry,

redrawn, and imperfect. Elements of authoritarianism can be found in democracies, and authoritarian regimes adopt certain components that give them a façade that they govern democratically. Scholars have coined a variety of terms to describe this in-betweenness, including “semi-authoritarianism” (Ottaway, 2003), “democratic authoritarianism” (Brancati, 2014), “hybrid” forms of government (Gilbert and Mohseni, 2011), “stealth authoritarianism” (Varol, 2013), or “electoral autocracies” (Matovski, 2022).

This introduction and the contributions to this special double issue advance our knowledge of (re)emerging authoritarianism by deepening our understanding of these growing trends and identifying new strategies that autocrats deploy to remain in power. Recognizing that the cases we include have widely different histories and conditions within which they emerge, the contributions bring an array of cases from different regions of the world to identify common threads that can help us identify autocratic practices when they start to emerge. Thus, without homogenizing across global regions, or resorting to “thin” comparisons (see Garrido, this issue), we aim to identify common practices, conditions, and strategies that allow emerging and established autocrats to undermine established democracies, dismantle emerging democracies, and constrain civil rights to retain power.

To enhance this collection’s analytical and comparative purchase, we purposefully selected cases from long-existing autocracies, cases from aspiring autocrats in established and emerging democracies, and cases of leaders who tried to use autocratic tools but failed or stepped aside after some successes. Moreover, these case studies highlight ideologically diverse regimes because a critical feature of emerging autocrats is their lack of a cohesive ideology or proposed political utopia (Guriev and Treisman, 2022; Stevens, 2023). The new breed of authoritarians comes from the extremes of the political left and right (see Corrales, this issue; see Neumann, this issue). Often, academics, advocates, and political leaders refrain from criticizing emerging autocrats more aligned with their political views (Lopez, 2023). We depart from this trend and cast a wide net of cases to include established and emerging autocrats from various ideological orientations to center the strategies, tools, and conditions that allow them to amass power through non-democratic means.

In the next section, we first contribute a discussion of the role of autocratic inter-state and transnational expert networks to identify a significant aspect of how today’s autocrats operate. We then follow by thematically summarizing the contributions’ key findings and end with a discussion of possible paths to spot nascent autocracies that erode and undermine democracies worldwide.

Our Contribution: Autocratic Inter-state and Expert Networks

An impetus for including an array of cases from around the globe in this special issue is to underscore the key place of international links among autocrats today. We draw attention to a critical feature of how the autocrats included in this special issue (and others not in this collection) do their work: they often do not act alone, isolated from leaders with similar autocratic tendencies. Technological advances facilitate cooperation, advice sharing, and information dissemination among autocratic leaders emerging in all corners of the world. Building on Scheppele’s (2018) observation that autocrats copy each other’s legal “toolbox of tricks” to retain power (p. 556) and Hall’s

(2023) evidence that (re)emerging autocrats in the post-Soviet region learn from and copy each other indirectly, we show that autocratic networks help diffuse a wide array of autocratic strategies worldwide. Although the articles in this special double issue do not analyze these diffusion practices in depth, in identifying common denominators across cases, we reveal this powerful aspect of how autocrats operate today. Thus, we posit that it is critical to attend to autocratic inter-state and transnational expert networks through which autocrats share power-grabbing strategies, information, and resources. By autocratic inter-state networks, we refer to meetings and cooperation among long-standing and aspiring authoritarian government officials, such as heads-of-states, state bureaucrats, and diplomats. In parallel, autocratic transnational expert networks also include non-state actors, such as political strategists and propagandists, who advise autocrats on attaining and remaining in power (Applebaum, 2021). Notably, autocratic inter-state and transnational expert networks do not seek to advance a particular political ideology or achieve a political utopia; instead, they are united by the thirst for power and foment fear to position autocrats as the saviors. For example, these networks include various combinations of extreme right conservatives in the United States, theocrats in Iran, communists in China, leftists in Venezuela, and conservatives in the Russian government, among others (Lopez, 2023; Riccardi and Colvin, 2023; Applebaum, 2024).

Actors connected to and through autocratic inter-state networks share know-how, information, and tactics to stay in power. Further, established and aspiring autocrats provide each other with economic resources and services, such as kleptocratic financial infrastructure, to diminish their reliance on the economies of democratic governments (Applebaum, 2021). These inter-state autocratic ties provide robust markets, needed commodities, soft loans, private bank accounts, and smuggling routes (Applebaum, 2024). The economic resources give autocracies resilience and the capacity to survive economic hardship (Applebaum, 2024). For example, autocrats in China, Cuba, Russia, and Iran helped Venezuela's newer autocratic regime (under Presidents Chavez and Maduro) with the military, technological, intelligence, and economic support needed to withstand the economic sanctions from the United States and other democratic governments (Applebaum, 2021, 2024; Lopez, 2023). Whereas Russia provides Maduro with loans and oil investments, Turkey invests in Venezuelan gold, and together, they appease the negative impact of the sanctions against Venezuela (Applebaum, 2024). Similarly, although the democratic international community has placed several bans and sanctions on Belarus's autocratic government, Russia and China invest heavily in the country, which helps to keep it afloat (Applebaum, 2021, 2024).

Likewise, networks of inter-state autocrats share security services to repress dissent (Applebaum, 2021). Leaked documents of meetings between officials of the Cyberspace Administration of China (CAC) and the Russian Roskomnadzor agency between 2017 and 2019 reveal that the Russian officials asked the Chinese government for advice on how to monitor, control, and censor the internet (Belovodyev, Soshnikov, and Standish, 2023). During these inter-state meetings, Chinese officials also sought Russian expertise to squash popular dissent and control mass media outlets (Belovodyev, Soshnikov, and Standish, 2023).

Autocratic regime officials meet at regional organizations. The ongoing meetings at regional organizations that convene Presidents, Ministers, and security forces from autocratic regimes, allow them to form diplomatic relationships, share ideas, and learn from each other's successes and failures in retaining power (Hall, 2023). For example, post-Soviet member states of the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) such as Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Armenia, Belarus, and Russia learned to get and retain power from Belarusian President Aleksander Lukashenko and Russian President Putin and their administrations (Hall, 2023), both of whom have retained power for over two decades. They have acquired enough autocratic expertise for aspiring peers to emulate.

The case of the United States today underscores the blurry lines between autocracies and democracies that autocratic inter-state alliances facilitate as such alliances may affect U.S. presidential elections. On Feb 23, 2024, Republican leaders invited the popular autocrat Salvadoran President Nayib Bukele and self-described "world's coolest dictator," to give a speech at the 2024 Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC), a key event for the Republican presidential primaries (Gillett, 2024; Sesin, 2024). At the CPAC, the recently re-elected President Bukele received a standing ovation and flaunted his crackdown on crime from gang violence as a model the U.S. should follow (Gillett, 2024) and appealed to U.S. conservatives' insular penchant by inviting them to join him in "fighting globalization," a notion that resonates strongly with this group. President Bukele (2019-present) used mass arrests to imprison anybody who could have been involved in gang activities and, in many cases, arrested innocent victims and committed human rights violations (Gillett, 2024). In his first term, his administration arrested over 75,000 people (Gillett, 2024). In effect, a central component of Bukele's autocratic toolkit includes his supposed cleansing the country of gang crime through repressive means (Cruz 2024), similar to Duterte in the Philippines (Evangelista 2023). Furthermore, President Bukele effectively co-opted the Constitutional Court by filling it with supporters who removed the constitutional ban on re-election so he could run for President again (Gillett 2024; Sesin 2024). Attendees at the CPAC conference cheerfully applauded his "successful" repressive response to crime and his encouragement to GOP leaders to use similar tactics in the United States.

To complement and sustain the autocrats' connections, a varied cadre of transnational expert networks of professional propagandists, political strategists, legal experts, and intellectuals help disseminate these autocrats' power-grabbing strategies worldwide (Applebaum, 2020; Applebaum, 2021; Lopez 2023). Although largely non-state actors, these intellectual and political elites can move in and out of government positions. Emerging authoritarians in particular need the expertise and clout of experts—who tend to be cosmopolitan, urban, well-educated, and economically secure—to attain and maintain power (Applebaum, 2020). Intellectuals and propagandists help emerging autocrats by creating blogs, writing books and reports, and creating other mass media material to change the discourse and portray the autocrats in a good light (Applebaum, 2020; Linker, 2023). Legal experts have been critical players in creating laws and changing state practices that help autocrats stay in power (Applebaum, 2020; Linker, 2023). Further, political strategists help aspiring autocrats run effective campaigns, corrupt the electoral system, and dismantle the system of checks and balances to be re-elected past term limits.

For example, currently in the United States, a coalition of right-wing experts, intellectuals, and former executive officials are spreading a narrative that the United States is facing a catastrophic collapse to convince GOP leaders and supporters that a government anchored in autocratic rule is the solution (Linker, 2023). A similar narrative helped former President Trump win the 2016 election (Linker, 2023). The Claremont Institute, a right-wing think tank, has played a vital role in disseminating such apocalyptic messages. In 2016, they published an editorial by Michael Anton in which he equated the election of Democratic candidate Hilary Clinton with putting the country in a terrorist hostage situation (Linker, 2023). His editorial went viral, and former President Trump appointed him to the National Security Council (Linker, 2023). Since leaving office, Anton has published a book further pushing the same existential threat narrative (Linker, 2023). Other intellectuals and religious leaders have published books with predictions of imminent doom and prescribed the same solution: the election of an aspiring autocrat like Donald J. Trump (Linker, 2023).

These expert networks are transnational—they constitute ties across international borders with other non-state and state officials so that an autocrat in one country seldom acts in a vacuum of advice and connections. Stephen K. Bannon, the political strategist and far-right media pundit who helped Trump get elected in 2016 (Horowitz, 2018), has been traveling around Europe and the Americas advising political leaders who are far-right nationalists with autocratic aspirations to broadcast his version of authoritarianism (Horowitz, 2018). As part of this effort, Bannon has repeatedly met and advised former Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro and his family on their media campaign and attempts to steal the presidential re-election (Kranish and Stanley-Becker, 2023). Even after both Bolsonaro and Trump lost their re-elections, Bannon and other political advisors to Trump have continued meeting with the Bolsonaro family to strategize future steps (Dwoskin and Sá Pessoa, 2022). Such strategies include undermining the independence of the Brazilian Judiciary Branch (Kranish and Stanley-Becker, 2023), a key tool of the Trump team in the United States as well as Bukele's in El Salvador.

Simultaneously, Bannon runs a propaganda machine that spreads misinformation in favor of aspiring autocrats (Klein, 2023). He even recruits disenchanted and canceled public intellectuals from the left and right—such as the former feminist scholar Naomi Wolf—giving them new platforms and audiences while using them to spread misinformation and build support for authoritarianism (Klein, 2023). In sum, authoritarian inter-state and expert networks help seasoned and aspiring autocrats ascend to power at the expense of established and nascent liberal democracies. This new breed of political leaders comes from different political backgrounds and share tools that not only weaken liberal democracies but also contribute to normalizing the autocrats' absolute authority—precisely because they rely on institutions created through democratic processes to achieve their autocratic objectives. In what follows, we thematically discuss the main findings of the articles in the special double issue.

I. The Façade of Democracy

One of the most prevalent and insidious aspects of (re)emerging autocratic regimes is their deceptive use of democratic elements. These regimes maintain some

elements of minimal democracy (e.g., elections, legal opposition, non-governmental organizations, and the press), liberal democracy (e.g., the Congress and the Courts remain operative), and participatory democracy (e.g., they overstate the representation of underrepresented group) (Varol, 2013; Scheppele, 2018; Corrales, 2023).³ However, deploying these democratic elements are mere facades; it helps to veil the autocratic practices that are truly at play. These tools of deception have become the new norm, effectively fooling even government supporters and the public in general into believing they are still living in a democracy, perhaps even a more mature version than one than in the past (e.g., Garrido, this issue). These democratic disguises include the manipulation of legal structures (Khalil, this issue; Garcia Holgado and Raúl Sánchez Urribarri, this issue), empowerment of hate groups and social movements that are favorable to autocracy (Van Dyke et al, this issue; McKenna and O'Donnell, this issue), and delegitimization of Western liberal democracy (Prorozova, this issue; Garrido, this issue).

Variation in the Legal Authoritarianism Toolkit

Long-standing and emerging autocrats use the law and legal systems to corrode democratic institutions and hide their undemocratic hold on power (Varol, 2013; Scheppele, 2018; Corrales, 2023). Several articles in this special issue contribute to authoritarian legalism scholarship by revealing variations in approaches and the development of new strategies autocrats use to maintain the facade of democratic legitimacy. Benjamin Garcia Holgado's and Raúl Sánchez Urribarri's (this issue) show that South American presidents have used legal autocratic tools to different degrees of effectiveness and temporality. Their comparative analysis reveals that, at one end, Argentine President Cristina Kirchner failed to co-opt the courts by not appointing judges loyal to her and willing to support her lawsuits and policy proposals to silence the press, undermining her power. Alternatively, Ecuadoran President Rafael Correa (2007-2017) gripped power by co-opting the Constitutional Court, enacting electoral reforms that allowed him to obtain a majority in Congress, silencing the media and opponents through lawsuits, and passing new laws that quelled the opposition and criminalized protests. President Correa's autocratic grip was short-lived because he did not run for re-election, and the candidate he endorsed reversed his non-democratic legal changes to reinstate democratic practices. Finally, Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez's (1999-2013) early co-optation of the judiciary through constitutional reforms and the appointment of loyalists has allowed his successor, Nicolás Maduro (2013-current), to continue using and abusing the legal system to establish his authoritarian rule. Their analysis also shows that long-standing or emergent autocrats learn from others' mistakes.

Further, Heba Khalil's (this issue) demonstrates how governments transitioning to democracy can use legal tools to re-insert a new form of autocracy. Her deep analysis of post-revolutionary Egypt reveals how revolutionary leaders saw legal experts as legitimate independent authorities and sought their help in creating a new democratic constitution, legal system, and institutions. However, these Egyptian legal elites had already been corrupted in the previous autocratic regime; in the transition to democracy, they helped emerging autocrats use legal tools, such as constitutional amendments and legislative reforms, to stay in power. In this manner, the legal experts that the

revolutionary leaders brought to help the country transition to democracy facilitated the creation of a new autocracy. Similarly, as Cruz (2024) observes, in El Salvador many of the “violent entrepreneurs,” that is, those running bureaucracies of violence and accused of gross violations of human rights in past military regimes, have either reemerged or remained embedded and in charge of the country’s security institutions. These former officers have helped construct a narrative that this society needs a “mano dura” (e.g., erosion of democratic guarantees, implementation of a “state of exception”) to combat crime, with Bukele, a skillful communicator and user of social media, emerging as the one to create order. Cruz argues that profound dissatisfaction with El Salvador’s political system created fertile ground for this autocrat to emerge—echoing the conditions under which Duterte rose to power in the Philippines (see Garrido, this issue).

The Role of Authoritarian Social Movements

Moreover, emerging autocrats maintain an allure of democratic legitimacy through the backing of grassroots social movements and hate organizations. In Brazil and the United States, “satellite political movements” are informal grassroots movements that support aspiring autocrats (Presidents Bolsonaro and Trump), bring them to the mainstream of politics, support their elections, and help them maintain the allure of legitimate democratic rule fulfilling the demands of their constituents even as they curtail civil liberties and corrupt democratic institutions (see McKenna and O'Donnell, this issue). Moreover, hate groups in the United States that are part of well-funded social movements and embedded within political parties (e.g., via positions and social connections) help advance democratic backsliding (Van Dyke et al., this issue). Republican congressional representatives from districts with a high concentration of these well-funded hate groups, particularly those that emerged during the Trump presidency, were more likely to support the United States Capitol attack on January 6, 2021, and refuse to certify elections (Van Dyke et al., this issue). In Nicaragua, the Ortega-Murillo regime has continuously attacked the autonomous feminist and critical non-governmental organizations while uplifting non-governmental organizations that promote traditional patriarchal values to retain the backing of the powerful Catholic and Evangelical leaders and build a charismatic authority of Ortega as the patriarch of the nation’s family (Newmann, this issue).

Anti-Western Democracy as a Tool of Autocracy

Emerging autocrats and autocratic regimes redefine the meaning of democracy, often seeking distance from Western liberal values, and maintaining cultural values that position their countries as morally superior to the West (Prozorova, this issue). In the Philippines, Marco Garrido’s study (this issue) shows that aspiring autocrats have exploited a country’s relatively weak, nascent liberal democratic institutions with a surprising twist. His analysis reveals that Filipino citizens supported the stronghold of President Rodrigo Duterte (2016-2022) because they believed that his brutal rule and autocratic tactics (e.g., the extrajudicial killing of people accused of drug dealing) compensated for the state’s institutional weakness. Thus, many Filipinos believed that Duterte’s iron hand actually helped democracy work (see Marco Garrido, this issue).

Similarly, Yulia Prozorova (this issue) argues that in post-Soviet Russia, political leaders who rose to power after President Boris Yeltsin (1991-1999) have been redefining the meaning and interpretation of democracy to legitimize autocratic rule. President Putin and his administration have rejected previous efforts to install a Western liberal democracy in Russia, arguing that it does not align with Russian history, culture, civilizational background, and national interests. Alternatively, they promote the legitimacy of non-liberal regimes and Putin's autocratic hold on power among Russian citizens. By portraying himself as protecting his people from the West—with its history of racism, colonialism, interventionism, and exploitation—Putin turns the tables on his critics and reassures his people that he will maintain a safe and strong Russia to face Western aggression (AP, 2023b). Putin's "us vs. them" framing allows him to depict the West as an imminent threat to Russia, a tactic that so far has proven effective as it also galvanizes nationalistic sentiment. As we finish this introduction, Putin is giving his fifth presidential inauguration speech, becoming the second-longest Russian or Soviet ruler, second only to Joseph Stalin.

II. Mass Media and Manipulation of Information

Another central theme across all contributions is autocrats' use of mass media, social media platforms, and communication technologies to energize their followers through personal appeals, manipulate and transmit misinformation, and build their charismatic authority and legitimacy. Through media, they can appeal to and manipulate emotions about personal safety that resonate with many people's experiences in an insecure and precarious world, constituting "emotional authoritarianism" (Hoffman, 2023a; Pollak, 2024).

Indeed, a key tool that autocrats deploy in various contexts is an "us vs. them" frame (or fiction), with media aiding its dissemination and consumption. This strategy purposefully divides a country and allows the autocrats to strengthen their base by reinforcing the notion of constant threats; whoever is invoked under "them" is a threat to "us." It is an effective and malleable tool, adaptable to a variety of conditions, as "them" can refer to Western liberal democracies, domestic minorities, criminals, immigrants, critics, intellectuals and academics, scientists, critical media, political or ideological opponents, or any group or individual whom the autocrats see as a thorn on their side as they seek to maintain power.⁴ This is fundamental to their self-construction as the (only) saviors of their nations.

Historian Ruth Ben-Ghiat (2021) characterizes as "strongmen" the autocrats who gain power by controlling mass media to diffuse their propaganda, promising to create a new nation without despised minorities or immigrants, displaying their virility, and eventually gaining charismatic domination akin to a personality cult. Matovski (2022) adds that political, economic, or social crises (manufactured or real) allow "strongmen" to gain widespread approval and win elections.⁵ He characterizes "strongmen" with charismatic authority capable of tapping into collective trauma and getting citizens to view them as the only ones capable of restoring order, stability, and justice through their uncompromising, forceful, and unchecked usage of executive power (Matovski 2022). Personal safety and identity crises are, therefore, potent tools that autocrats in El Salvador (Bukele), the Philippines (Duterte), India (Modi), Russia (Putin), and Hungary (Orban) deploy to attain and remain in power (Pollak 2024). Similarly, Guriev and

Treisman (2022) argue that new autocrats are “spin doctors” who are masters of deceit and control the mass media to diffuse misinformation and propaganda that makes them appear competent. Once in power, these “strongmen” can use other tools, such as corrupting democratic institutions (Ben-Ghiat, 2021) and using repression to stay in power (Matovski, 2022). However, most importantly, they must retain their popular appeal by manufacturing crises and presenting themselves as saviors of a disgruntled society, or else they stand to lose power (Matovski, 2022). Creating an “us vs. them” and dividing populations enhances the effectiveness of this approach.

In this special issue, Bavbek and Kennedy explain how Turkey’s Erdoğan compelled the media to construct him as a legitimate winner of the elections through a framing of “crisis after crisis.” Garcia Holgado and Sánchez Urribarri (this issue) argue that Argentine President Cristina Kirchner’s (2007-2015) efforts to silence media outlets who accused her of corruption through lawsuits and new tax policies failed because the court struck them down. In contrast to other autocrats who have used media effectively, Kirchner’s failure to weaken the media ultimately eroded her power. Duterte’s supporters in the Philippines were notably active on social media, amplifying his message during a particularly bitter presidential election (Garrido, this issue). Brazil’s Bolsonaro and Trump in the United States have been adept at using social media platforms to cultivate devoted supporters who amplify their leaders’ messages and disinformation campaigns but also use these media channels to defend their leaders (McKenna and O’Donnell, this issue; Monetti, this issue). For example, Bolsonaro used new social media outlets to discredit and delegitimize mainstream media outlets and maintained the allure of open public speech by regularly broadcasting discourses on YouTube and Twitter, presenting himself as an alternative, more reliable source of information (Monetti, this issue). Indeed, suppressing independent media and manipulating public perceptions were early and effective tactics of Putin’s autocratic project (Prozorova, this issue). China’s strategy to use social media to target opponents in the diaspora by framing their activities as separatist has helped the regime to deploy a “repressive nationalist diaspora” (Wong, this issue).

III. Neo-repression

Emerging and established autocrats are using new repressive tactics, some of which are relatively subtle and covert. Whereas previous and long-standing autocrats have resorted to direct human rights violations—such as torture and public extrajudicial killings—to repress opponents and instill fear in the population (Almeida 2008), some emerging autocrats use tactics that maintain the allure of an open society (Varol, 2013, Scheppele, 2018; Guriev and Treisman, 2022). These new or re-emerging autocrats employ covert oppression to avoid backlash (Guriev and Treisman, 2022). For example, covert repression strategies include persecuting opponents for non-political crimes and arresting them for short periods to wreck their livelihoods and attack their credibility to silence them (Guriev and Treisman, 2022).

Moreover, some emerging autocratic regimes do not seek to monopolize the legitimate use of violence through physical force and, instead, they opt to share this function with state-sanctioned civil groups or subnational governors to co-opt these actors and expand their power (Corrales, 2023; Briceño-León, 2023). Paramilitaries, armed civilians, illicit economic actors, hate groups, even media groups, and trolls use a

variety of physical, economic, and psychological coercion to repress resistance and uphold autocratic rule (Corrales, 2023; Guriev and Treisman, 2022). These unofficial coercive actors may appear to act autonomously; however, autocratic leaders encourage them through direct incentives to do coercion on their behalf (Corrales, 2023; Briceño-León, 2023). For example, Venezuelan President Maduro funds “colectivos,” which are paramilitary groups that gather intelligence, monitor potential government opponents and use physical force, death threats, kidnappings, and other forms of coercion to squash political opposition (Corrales, 2023; Briceño-León, 2023). In Nicaragua, the Ortega-Murillo regime initially created Councils of Citizen Power, which fostered participatory democracy in coordinating social programs to combat inequality. As their thirst for power grew, they expanded these groups' purpose to surveil and repress regime opponents (Neumann, this issue). The resulting autocratic coercive apparatus is more diversified and pervasive (Corrales, 2023).

The articles in this special double issue identify other neo-repressive strategies. In Uruguay, Achugar and Fried Amilivia (this issue) show how democratic leaders across the political spectrum—from those who claim to uphold human rights to those who support military repression—engage in a “Politics of Oblivion.” Since Uruguay transitioned to democracy, officials have been complicit in hiding evidence of the former military dictatorship’s violent repression, effectively perpetuating their impunity. The re-tooling of the dictatorship has come to the limelight since the country’s 2020 presidential election. Empowered by the right-wing governing coalition of President Lacalle Pou (2020-present), perpetrators of the former military dictatorship and their supporters are co-opting human rights organizations and discourses to reframe themselves as victims of non-state subversives. Among their demands is that military officers convicted of human rights violations receive more humane treatment, such as house arrest, further negating any responsibilities for state violence, opening a path for continued impunity.

Moreover, emerging autocrats co-opt civil society groups to repress opponents domestically (Corrales, 2023) and abroad (Hoffman, 2023b; Chi-pan Wong, this issue), creating enemies, real and false. The governments of China, Turkey, Tajikistan, Russia, and Egypt are some of the main perpetrators of transnational repression; their leaders often label political opponents as “terrorists” or “extremists” to demonize them and justify their kidnapping, arrests, and assassinations abroad (Hoffman, 2023b). For example, Wong (this issue) shows that leaders of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) use Chinese civilians to repress opponents abroad. The PRC’s regime deploys discourses and misinformation that divide emigrants into two camps. Deploying an “us vs. them” frame, those who are critical of the government are depicted as traitors influenced and funded by Western imperialism. Alternatively, they portray those who support the PRC regime as righteous fighters against the West and colonialization, not unlike Putin’s narrative about the ills and sins of the West as an existential threat. Then, the PRC recruits regime loyalists abroad to help identify, surveil, antagonize, and silence dissidents. The transnational repressive tactic through the diaspora allows the Chinese government to avoid responsibility for silencing opponents. After all, nationalistic Chinese individuals living abroad, not the PRC state actors, are the ones harassing and silencing the migrants who are critical of the Chinese regime.

The toolbox of (re)emerging autocrats includes a wide array of transnational repressive strategies, a strategy also used by autocratic regimes of the past often

involving regional bureaucratic coordination (Menjívar and Rodríguez 2005). Some autocrats add political exiles to Interpol's international criminal database, so they receive notices whenever an exile travels abroad to track their movements and persecute them (Bradley, 2024). For example, in May 2021, the Belarusian government intercepted a Ryanair commercial flight from Greece to Lithuania and, under the pretense of a bomb onboard, got the pilot to land in Minsk (AP 2023a). Upon landing, the Belarusian police arrested two passengers, Belarusian journalist Raman Pratasevich and his Russian girlfriend Sofia Sapega (AP, 2023a). Sapega was detained for a year and pardoned, and Pratasevich was detained for two years before being pardoned.

Moreover, even though autocratic regimes' persecutions and killings of opponents on foreign soil have a long history,⁶ technological advances such as shared databases, communication innovations, and ease of travel have refined these practices and expanded their use. In September 2023, Canadian Prime Minister Trudeau accused Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi (2014-present) of orchestrating the killing of Hardeep Singh Nijjar on Canadian soil (Block, 2023). Nijjar was a Canadian citizen, a harsh critic of Modi, and a leader of a Sikh successionist movement in India (Block, 2023). In 2018, the Russian military intelligence service tried to poison Sergei Skripal in England, who is a British citizen, served in the Russian intelligence service, and was a British double agent (Schwartz and Barry, 2018). Recently, Chilean prosecutors have accused Venezuelan state agents of kidnapping and assassinating political refugee Ronald Ojeda on Chilean soil (AP 2024). Ojeda had served in the Venezuelan military before becoming an outspoken critic of Maduro's regime (AP 2024).⁷

IV. Analytical Contributions and Future Research

Finally, the articles in this special issue present important analytical contributions and open opportunities for future research. In this introduction, we have shown that autocratic inter-state and expert networks embolden emerging autocrats worldwide. Future research on rising authoritarianism needs to move beyond national-level analysis to account for the role of these inter-state and transnational processes. Furthermore, scholars are encouraged to avoid using the "StrongMen" concept as shorthand that simplifies, and may misinform, more than it illuminates. Bavbek and Kennedy show how the popular "StrongMen" analytical category is problematic as it has become a floating signifier that reifies the democratic West versus the autocratic East binary and obscures autocrats' weaknesses and inter-state ties to liberal democracies. Specifically, when autocrats, like Putin and Erdoğan, are labeled StrongMen by Western media and leaders, it reinforces the idea that people in the East are not prepared for democracy. Most pervasive, the StrongMen floating signifier obscures their inter-state collaborations with Western liberal democracies and how the West upholds them (Bavbek and Kennedy, this issue). Future research would do well to avoid reifying the democracy versus autocracy binary and focus on aspiring autocrats who are women or possess other forms of authority (beyond charisma).

Additionally, the articles in this double issue underscore the critical need to account for the historical context and heterogeneity of democratic backsliding. In this issue, Garrido's historical contextualization of Presidents Duterte in the Philippines and Trump in the United States reveals key differences in how their constituents view the

presidents given their countries' different democratization processes. Similarly, a historical analysis of the rise of Putin in Russia and the ongoing "Politics of Oblivion" in Uruguay helps us identify the origins and long-lasting perseverance of autocratic tendencies (in this issue Prozorova; Achugar and Fried Amilivia). At the same time, autocratic regimes are not the sole purview of right-wing governments; those on the left also need attention, as Corrales (this issue) invites us to do in his response to this collection. For instance, in the case of Nicaragua, in contrast to several other Latin American cases, there has been real democratic backsliding as the autocracy has subverted the gains of the revolution for women. Newmann (this issue) shows how Nicaraguan President Ortega, a left-wing populist leader, is effectively demonizing feminist advocacy groups to present himself as the nation's patriarch and legitimize his stronghold on power. Accounting for these specificities across the political spectrum of regimes helps to avoid homogenizing autocratic regimes simply because they share certain characteristics or employ similar tactics.

Finally, scholars are encouraged to examine variation and avoid selecting cases on the dependent variable (e.g., only studying successful autocrats) (e.g., Garcia Holgado and Sánchez Urribarri, in this issue). Drawing lessons from the articles in this collection, we encourage future in-depth case studies and cross-country research to further historically contextualize emerging autocrats to identify similarities and differences and under what conditions the autocrats succeed or fail in using similar strategies to retain power. Part of this analysis needs to account for new definitions and imaginaries of democracy, parallel authoritarian inter-state and transnational networks, and the role of pro-authoritarian non-state groups that help repress dissidents abroad and legitimize autocratic rule domestically. Scholarly attention is needed on autocrats' deployment of "us vs. them" frames that pose singular threats to societies where authoritarianism is emerging as well as to established democracies.

By bringing research from different national contexts together, our objective has been to identify common denominators across autocracies (emergent, existing, reemerging) around the world, despite their specific manifestations (e.g., owing to historical and structural configurations) to contribute the unique theorizing that comparative analysis makes possible. Distilling common features of autocracies across cases may also allow us to detect emergent autocracies when we see them and to consider their consequences (as the articles in the issue demonstrate). In this vein, the articles show that each "tool" or autocratic strategy is not contained solely to that strategy; autocratic legalism does not only impact the justice system but spills over to encroach on rights and civil liberties, which then can easily spill into more openly repressive tactics. Therefore, these "tools" or strategies are also deeply intertwined; one is connected or gives rise to another. Identifying these links can better equip us not only to detect an emergent autocracy (and democratic "backsliding") but also to consider the long-term, profoundly transformative consequences for democracy. Although we recognize that comparisons across vast cases may yield "thin comparisons" (see Garrido this issue), we see value in identifying common denominators, especially at this historical moment; it permits theorizing from (seemingly very dissimilar) empirical cases and provides a lens to detect a rising autocracy as a veritable threat to societies. Identifying common strategies behind the death of democracies may equip us with the knowledge to respond before it is too late. As Juan Sebastián Chamorro, the

former Nicaraguan presidential candidate detained by the Ortega-Murillo regime, warns us all, “autocrats that came to power through democratic systems a[re] like a disease - where early symptoms are often ignored until it begins to consume the body, seemingly too late to stop” (Chamorro 2024).

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ENDNOTES

¹ Most of the articles in this special issue were presented at the American Sociological Association's official (double) panel, selected competitively, at the International Sociological Association's World Congress in June 2023 in Melbourne, Australia. Additional articles included were selected from a general call for contributions. We thank the contributors to this special double issue for collegially working with us throughout the process and to the external reviewers for their thoughtful comments on each article. We also thank Paul Almeida and Javier Corrales for reading the entire double issue and providing insightful suggestions. A special thanks to Javier, the political scientist and renowned scholar of autocracy and populism, for readily agreeing to offer a response to what the authors in this collection, almost all sociologists, have to say about this topic.

² Autocrats permit and rig elections to create an image of high popular support, showcase their iron grip on power to deter dissidence and identify and silence emerging opposition leaders (Taub 2024).

³ We thank Javier Corrales for his thoughtful feedback on these points.

⁴ This is exemplified in a speech by former President Trump where in one sweeping "us vs. them" statement he promised his audience that together they would "drive out the globalists, communists, Marxists, fascists, the sick political class, the fake news media, and evict Joe Biden from the White House" (Homans 2024).

⁵ Crises, manufactured or real, allow autocrats to loosen constitutional safeguards, claim extraordinary powers, and thus subvert democracy (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2019).

⁶ Lessa (2022) and McSherry (2005) uncover evidence of coordinated efforts between South American military juntas to repress and assassinate dissidents on foreign soil between the 1970s and 1980s.

⁷ The killings of political opponents as a tool of autocrats is not new, as the famous case of Orlando Letelier, a leading opponent of General Augusto Pinochet, shows. He was assassinated by car bombing in Washington DC by agents of the Chilean secret police (DINA). However, advances in data sharing and communications technology have greatly facilitated the use of this strategy, even as media coverage and investigations of these crimes have also become more sophisticated.