

Breaking Down Democracy: Goals, Strategies, and Methods of Modern Authoritarians



Chinese President Xi Jinping and Russian President Vladimir Putin in Beijing, 2016. (Lintao Zhang/Getty Images)

Key Findings

- Modern authoritarianism has succeeded, where previous totalitarian systems failed, due to new strategies of repression, the exploitation of open societies, and the spread of illiberal policies in democratic countries themselves.
- Russia, under President Putin, has played an outsized role in the development of modern authoritarian systems, especially in media control, propaganda, the smothering of civil society, and the weakening of political pluralism.
- The toxic combination of unfair elections and “majoritarianism” is spreading to illiberal leaders in what are still partly democratic countries. Increasingly, populist politicians—once in office—claim the right to suppress the media, civil society, and other democratic institutions by citing support from a majority of voters.

- The hiring of political consultants and lobbyists from democratic countries to represent the interests of autocracies is a growing phenomenon. China is in the vanguard, but there are also K Street representatives for Russia, Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, Turkey, Ethiopia, and practically all of the authoritarian states in the Middle East.

Executive Summary

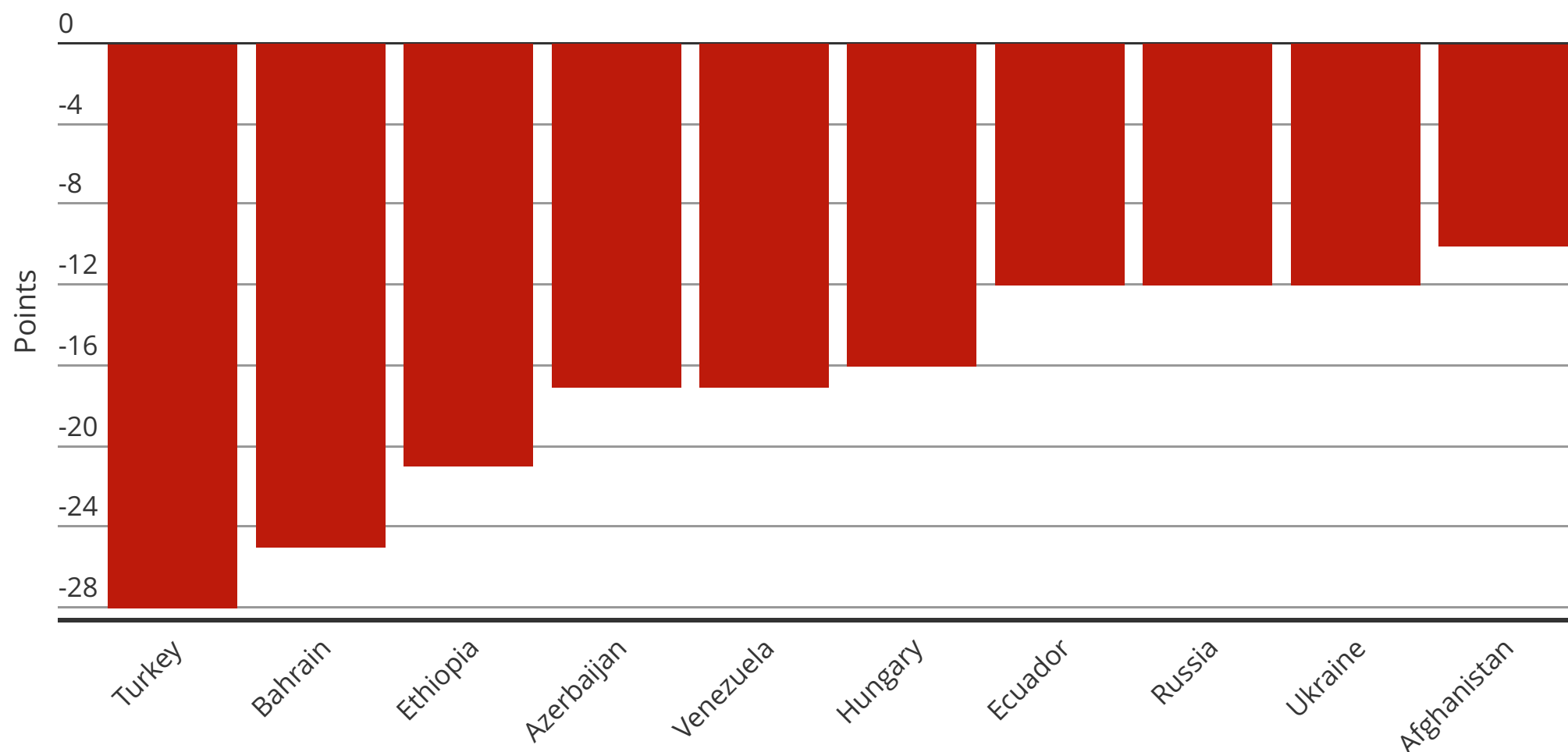
by Arch Puddington

The 21st century has been marked by a resurgence of authoritarian rule that has proved resilient despite economic fragility and occasional popular resistance. Modern authoritarianism has succeeded, where previous totalitarian systems failed, due to refined and nuanced strategies of repression, the exploitation of open societies, and the spread of illiberal policies in democratic countries themselves. The leaders of today's authoritarian systems devote full-time attention to the challenge of crippling the opposition without annihilating it, and flouting the rule of law while maintaining a plausible veneer of order, legitimacy, and prosperity.

Central to the modern authoritarian strategy is the capture of institutions that undergird political pluralism. The goal is to dominate not only the executive and legislative branches, but also the media, the judiciary, civil society, the commanding heights of the economy, and the security forces. With these institutions under the effective if not absolute control of an incumbent leader, changes in government through fair and honest elections become all but impossible.

Major Declines for Influential Countries Over the Past 10 Years

Change in Freedom in the World Aggregate Score, 2007-2016.



Unlike Soviet-style communism, modern authoritarianism is not animated by an overarching ideology or the messianic notion of an ideal future society. Nor do today's autocrats seek totalitarian control over people's everyday lives, movements, or thoughts. The media are more diverse and entertaining under modern authoritarianism, civil society can enjoy an independent existence (as long as it does not pursue political change), citizens can travel around the country or abroad with only occasional interference, and private enterprise can flourish (albeit with rampant corruption and cronyism).

This study explains how modern authoritarianism defends and propagates itself, as regimes from different regions and with diverse socioeconomic foundations copy and borrow techniques of political control. Among its major findings:

- Russia, under President Vladimir Putin, has played an outsized role in the development of modern authoritarian systems. This is particularly true in the areas of media control, propaganda, the smothering of civil society, and the weakening of political pluralism. Russia has also moved aggressively against neighboring states where democratic institutions have emerged or where democratic movements have succeeded in ousting corrupt authoritarian leaders.
- The rewriting of history for political purposes is common among modern authoritarians. Again, Russia has taken the lead, with the state's assertion of authority over history textbooks and the process, encouraged by Putin, of reassessing the historical role of Joseph Stalin.
- The hiring of political consultants and lobbyists from democratic countries to represent the interests of autocracies is a growing phenomenon. China is clearly in the vanguard, with multiple representatives working for the state and for large economic entities closely tied to the state. But there are also K Street representatives for Russia, Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, Turkey, Ethiopia, and practically all of the authoritarian states in the Middle East.
- The toxic combination of unfair elections and crude majoritarianism is spreading from modern authoritarian regimes to illiberal leaders in what are still partly democratic countries. Increasingly, populist politicians—once in office—claim the right to suppress the media, civil society, and other democratic institutions by citing support from a majority of voters. The resulting changes make it more difficult for the opposition to compete in future elections and can pave the way for a new authoritarian regime.
- An expanding cadre of politicians in democracies are eager to emulate or cooperate with authoritarian rulers. European parties of the nationalistic right and anticapitalist left have expressed admiration for Putin and aligned their policy goals with his. Others have praised illiberal governments in countries like Hungary for their rejection of international democratic standards in favor of perceived national interests. Even when there is no direct collaboration, such behavior benefits authoritarian powers by breaking down the unity and solidarity of the democratic world.
- There has been a rise in authoritarian internationalism. Authoritarian powers form loose but effective alliances to block criticism at the United Nations and regional organizations like the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe and the Organization of American States, and to defend embattled allies like Syria's Bashar al-Assad. There is also growing replication of what might be called authoritarian best practices, vividly on display in the new

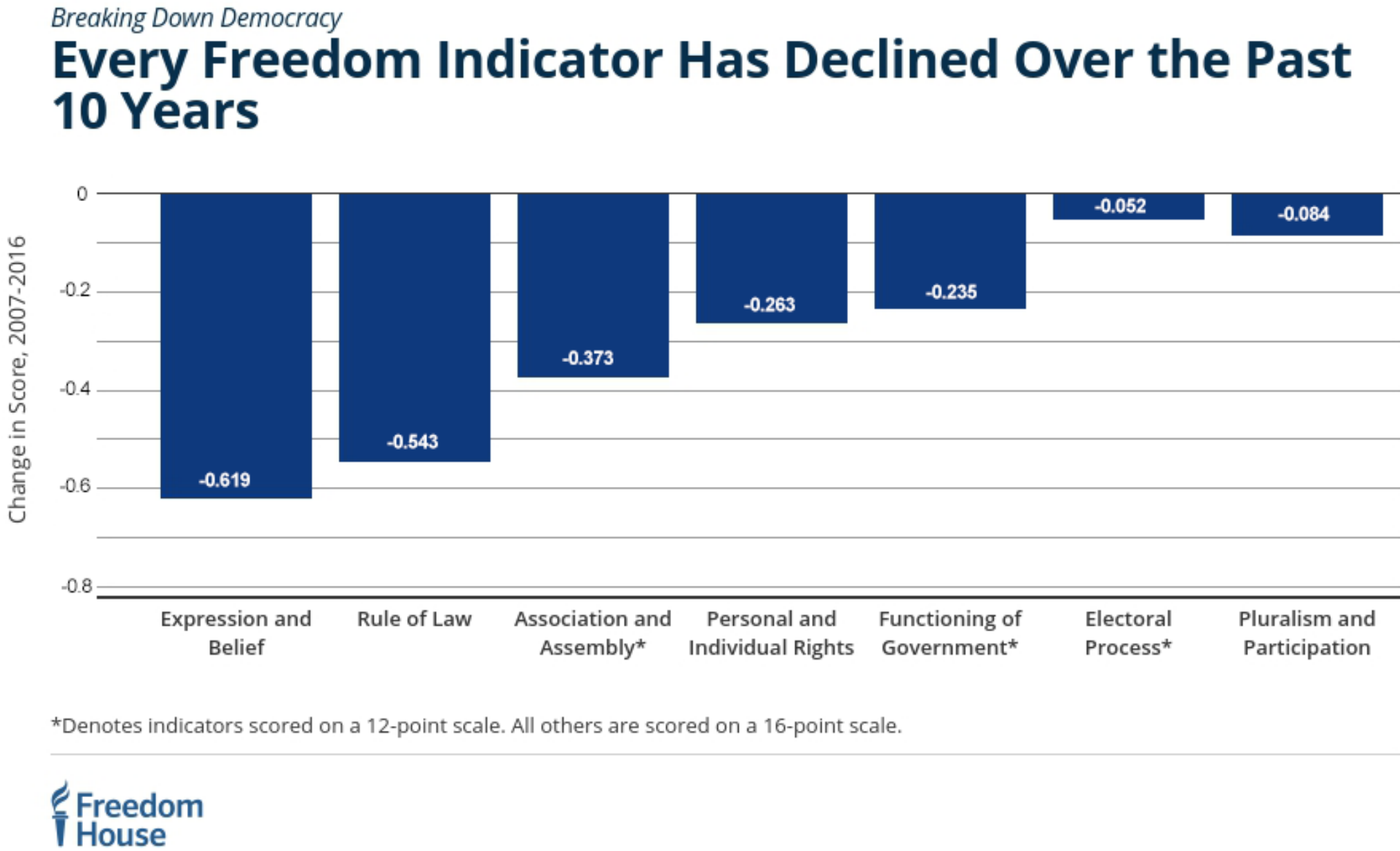
Chinese law on nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and efforts by Russia and others to learn from China's experience in internet censorship.

- Modern authoritarians are working to revalidate the concept of the leader-for-life. One of the seeming gains of the postcommunist era was the understanding that some form of term limits should be imposed to prevent incumbents from consolidating power into a dictatorship. In recent years, however, a number of countries have adjusted their constitutions to ease, eliminate, or circumvent executive term limits. The result has been a resurgence of potential leaders-for-life from Latin America to Eurasia.
- While more subtle and calibrated methods of repression are the defining feature of modern authoritarianism, the past few years have featured a reemergence of older tactics that undermine the illusions of pluralism and openness as well as integration with the global economy. Thus Moscow has pursued its military intervention in Ukraine despite economic sanctions and overseen the assassination of opposition figures; Beijing has revived the practice of coerced public “confessions” and escalated its surveillance of the Tibetan and Uighur minorities to totalitarian levels; and Azerbaijan has made the Aliyev family's monopoly on political power painfully obvious with the appointment of the president's wife as “first vice president.”
- Modern authoritarian systems are employing these blunter methods in a context of increased economic fragility. Venezuela is already in the process of political and economic disintegration. Other states that rely on energy exports have also experienced setbacks due to low oil and gas prices, and China faces rising debt and slower growth after years of misallocated investment and other structural problems. But these regimes also face less international pressure to observe democratic norms, raising their chances of either surviving the current crises or—if they break down—giving way to something even worse.

In subsequent sections, this report will examine the methods employed by authoritarian powers to neutralize precisely those institutions that were thought to be the most potent weapons against a revitalized authoritarianism. The success of the Russian and Chinese regimes in bringing to heel and even harnessing the forces produced by globalization—digital media, civil society, free markets—may be their most impressive and troubling achievement.

Modern authoritarianism is particularly insidious in its exploitation of open societies. Russia and China have both taken advantage of democracies' commitment to freedom of expression and delivered infusions of propaganda and disinformation. Moscow has effectively prevented foreign

broadcasting stations from reaching Russian audiences even as it steadily expands the reach of its own mouthpieces, the television channel RT and the news service Sputnik. China blocks the websites of mainstream foreign media while encouraging its corporations to purchase influence in popular culture abroad through control of Hollywood studios. Similar combinations of obstruction at home and interference abroad can be seen in sectors including civil society, academia, and party politics.



The report draws on examples from a broad group of authoritarian states and illiberal democracies, but the focus remains on the two leading authoritarian powers, China and Russia. Much of the report, in fact, deals with Russia, since that country, more than any other, has incubated and refined the ideas and institutions at the foundation of 21st-century authoritarianism.

Finally, a basic assumption behind the report is that modern authoritarianism will be a lasting feature of geopolitics. Since 2012, both Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping have doubled down on existing efforts to stamp out internal dissent, and both have grown more aggressive on the world stage. All despotic regimes have inherent weaknesses that leave them vulnerable to sudden

shocks and individually prone to collapse. However, the past quarter-century has shown that dictatorship in general will not disappear on its own. Authoritarian systems will seek not just to survive, but to weaken and defeat democracy around the world.

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