

# International Political Party Support by 'Bad Guys'

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# International Political Party Support by ‘Bad Guys’

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## Abstract

This paper offers an analytical framing and some provisional hypotheses for exploring international party assistance by leading autocracies. In doing so it provides a starting point for comparing that assistance with international democracy promotion’s support for political parties and party system development. The outline is presented against a background of increasing scholarly attention to international autocracy support. The paper introduces a format for comparing more broadly some key similarities and differences between autocracy support and democracy support in general, before going on to use that format for examining party support specifically. Although international democracy support to parties has featured in a growing academic literature, the extent of party support by autocracies and its distinguishing features remain largely unexplored, to date. The paper aims to stimulate research, by offering some guiding thoughts ahead of the empirical fact-finding that will be essential to advancing knowledge on this subject and its significance for politics inside countries. The implications for democracy support and for its approach to political party assistance can be drawn out subsequently.

**Keywords:** political parties, international autocracy support, international democracy support.

## Introduction

The last three decades of international support for democratic breakthrough, transition to democracy and democratic consolidation in prospective new democracies have seen the development of a significant literature on political party assistance. This has taken place in the context of a huge research effort into democratization more generally. However, more recently there has been growing attention to the persistence of authoritarian rule, giving rise to increasing interest in international dimensions of authoritarianism. The discourse has witnessed the emergence of a conceptual debate (for example Tolstrup 2015; Tansey 2015) on the meaning of so called autocracy promotion abroad by countries with authoritarian or semi-authoritarian regimes, and on the likely implications for democratisation there.

The regimes in question include Russia, most notably its role in the regional neighbourhood, and China, where historically the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has cultivated direct links with communist parties in other countries including of course the former Soviet Union. Even today the CCP takes an especially close interest in internal political developments in Taiwan where it inserts a diplomatic war of words into election debates and encourages local businessmen to support China-leaning candidates in presidential election campaigns. Other leading autocracies implicated in autocracy support abroad include Iran, for example its support for Hezbollah in Lebanon and Shia politicians in Iraq, and Saudi Arabia (Hassan 2015 for example assesses Saudi's role in countervailing democracy promotion in Egypt and Bahrain). Venezuela, most notably under the presidency of Hugo Chávez (1999–2013) is a yet further example owing to its involvement in the politics of some Andean countries, Nicaragua and Cuba. Individual case studies have focussed on a range of modalities whereby the governments of leading autocracies might be thought to influence – either purposely or unintentionally, and with differing outcomes – the internal politics of other countries, with consequences that could bear on the type, stability and direction of travel of the political regime there.

A distinctive component of international democracy support has comprised support for strengthening political parties and competitive party systems in democratising countries and prospective new democracies (see Carothers 2006 for what is still the single most extensive overall assessment of party aid). Party support has never been the main component of

democracy assistance whether measured in terms of money spent or public profile of the organisations engaged in providing it. In contrast international support for the staging of elections and support for civil society-building have enjoyed much greater prominence. But the contentious political issues at both the national and the international level that surround international party support specifically contribute to making it a significant activity – and one that has attracted considerable political controversy, in the context of democracy support. Yet in the emerging literature on autocracy support, detailed analysis of party support or partisan support for individual candidates and the political forces that they head is notable for its absence. There are but a few partial exceptions.

One such exception dwells principally on Russian financial and technical assistance to the election campaigns of Ukraine's former President Yanukovich and his Party of Regions. The transfer of fraudulent electoral practices and voter coercion and money for vote buying, most notably from around the time of Ukraine's 'orange revolution' in 2004, has been reported in several accounts of Ukraine (one of the first being Åslund and McFaul 2006). Another example that has received some (but much less) attention is Venezuelan support for ideological – that is to say, left-wing and anti-US – *compadres* like President Daniel Ortega and the Sandinista Liberation Front in Nicaragua, and similar efforts in Bolivia and Peru (see Vanderhill, 2003). Yet even Tansey's recent path-breaking monograph *International Politics of Authoritarian Rule* (2016b) contains no entry for political parties as such in the book's index. Instead Tansey focuses more on how external powers especially autocracies may signal in advance that a prospectively fraudulent election in another country will be supported. This can increase the chances that such fraud will happen, because it lowers the international costs, as shown in the case of Zimbabwe's elections 2000-2008. Tansey chooses to concentrate on how international sponsorship helps keeps incumbent autocrats like Zimbabwe's President Robert Mugabe in power. This of course leaves out of consideration whether and how aspiring autocrats in opposition in a country including one with far greater democratic credentials than Zimbabwe might be helped to gain power by contesting elections or in other ways.

Of course there are other ways and means whereby leading autocracies can and do try to influence domestic politics elsewhere, such as by offering lucrative cross-border economic

cooperation or, conversely, withholding vital energy supplies (Russian behaviour towards Ukraine being a prime example), offering bilateral loans on favourable terms, arms sales and diplomatic support generally. These have been subjected to the spotlight of academic inquiry far more than has direct support to political parties. And although an explanation for this imbalance can be found in terms of our greater knowledge of these other ways and means, some of which take place in full public view or are hard to conceal, the explanation does not permit an easy inference that party support by autocracies is too insignificant to warrant further serious investigation.

Indeed it is now not hard to find anecdotal media reports of Russian government-backed funding of so-called challenger parties and politicians who have populist agendas that might conceivably come to threaten liberal or, even, democratic values and institutions even in such a long established democracy as France – let alone in struggling new or vulnerable democracies in Central and Eastern Europe. Examples include Austria's Freedom Party, Greece's Golden Dawn, Italy's Northern League, Hungary's Jobbik, and France's Front National, all of whom are said to have received loans or to be making arrangements that would bring them loans from Russian state backed banks, without contravening national or international law (*The Telegraph* 11 February 2017). Austria's Freedom Party for instance is widely reported to have concluded a five year 'cooperation agreement' with President Putin's United Russia, facilitating a Russian bank loan. Around the same time Frauke Petry, leader of Germany's Alternative für Deutschland party (AfD) met with parliamentarians close to President Putin and the ultra-nationalist Liberal Democratic Party in Moscow, ostensibly for the purpose of developing 'inter-party cooperation' and contacts among their respective youth organisations. In addition to all of this, foreign (i.e. Russian) government backed cyber-attacks on political party or party related institutions in some western countries – as well as on government and commercial institutions there – have come into the headlines too, in the aftermath of suspicious Russian activity in the run up to the 2016 presidential election in the US and elsewhere.

Elsewhere in the world, in countries with very repressive regimes, examples exist of opposition political parties that want to open up political space but argue the support some foreign autocracy gives to the government or ruling party nullifies any chance of unseating

illiberal rulers at the ballot box. In these circumstances, political opponents of the regime can be discouraged from even trying to bring about nonviolent political change. For example President Mugabe and his Zimbabwe African National Union Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) party received offers of financial support from Libya's leader Colonel Gaddafi, along with other helpful forms of international support that included favourable high level diplomatic interventions and biased international election observer missions (Tansey 2016b, chapter 4). In Cambodia opposition parties complain about Chinese support for the regime (the proportion of Chinese public diplomacy typically conducted through party-to-party relations is seen by Bader 2015 to advantage governing parties in various African and Asian countries with authoritarian or semi-authoritarian party-based regimes).

All things considered, too little is known about party support by 'bad guys' or even their more intentionally destructive activities such as cyber-attacks on internal party communications for us to be able to confirm the reliability of each and every claim let alone assess the magnitude and understand the true significance of the overall phenomenon. On the one hand, in the United States even President Trump disputes CIA allegations of Russian hacking of political party electronic communications during the 2016 presidential election and the selective release of details calculated to damage harm Hillary Clinton's prospects of winning the presidency. On the other hand, in the UK Ciaran Martin, who is Director of General Cyber Security at GCHQ (the UK Government's Communications Headquarters) moved ahead in March 2017 to offer tailored seminars to the country's political parties to help them understand the threats of cyber-attacks (from Russia) and the dangers of having vital party information stolen ([www.thetimes.co.uk/article/gchq-russian-cyber-threat-touk-elections-20w19s5ld](http://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/gchq-russian-cyber-threat-touk-elections-20w19s5ld)). Against this background the findings of a review ordered by the US Director of National Intelligence into Russian clandestine funding of European parties over the last decade – a review commissioned by the US Congress – are eagerly awaited. So, even if the growing sense that there is definitely something going on – that is to say, attempts by 'bad guys' to influence party politics in other countries – has yet to be backed up in official publications now is not too soon to begin thinking about the prospects for more scientific analysis through scholarly investigation. This paper argues, then, for a new generation of

research into international party support that will investigate support by ‘bad guys’ – namely actors in authoritarian and semi-authoritarian regimes – so making a start on filling this void.

The paper comprises two parts. The opening section contextualises the dimension of party support by first introducing the contemporary debate about autocracy promotion more generally. It identifies chief similarities and differences between on the one side democracy support and on the other side interventions from leading autocracies like those named above – interventions that in some countries might help keep authoritarian or semi-authoritarian regimes in place or have the effect of restraining or undermining democratic progress there, while adding a new dimension to party-based competition in a number of established democracies elsewhere. The paper’s second section draws out some implications for the study of party assistance specifically, both as an established branch of democracy support that has attracted scholarly attention and as an ingredient of autocracy support too. The analytical framework offered by the paper includes eleven provisional hypotheses to guide research. It does not engage in data collection or report original fieldwork findings. And for the sake of convenience it takes for granted a shared and broad understanding of what such terms as autocracy, democracy (both liberal and electoral variants), and democratisation refer to. The literature generally contains much contentious theorising about the meaning and definition of these and other key terms such as hybrid regime and competitive authoritarianism. The same is even true of the term democracy promotion, where ‘democracy support’ is now preferred by some analysts and practitioners. But here is not the place to interrogate this literature. Similarly, the term ‘bad guys’ is not meant to have sexist connotations. It can refer to a variety of actors or types of actor in so called autocracies where their actions lend support to political parties abroad, especially parties that exhibit or potentially might come to exhibit anti-democratic or illiberal inclinations.

### **Part I: The rise of autocracy support**

In line with the evolving debate on the conceptual meaningfulness of the term autocracy promotion, the practical political relevance for democratisation in countries on the receiving end has begun to attract attention (examples include Burnell 2011 chapters 11 and 12; Vanderhill 2013; Babayan and Risse 2015; *APSA Comparative Democratization* February

2015; von Soest 2015; Tansey 2016a, Tansey 2016b, Tolstrup 2016). International collaboration or cooperation with regimes like those in China and President Putin's Russia is one focal point, and another is emulation and learning, or the sharing of 'worst practices'. The subversion of liberal or pro-democratic international institutions and standards by the deliberate manipulation of competing media narratives has also been noticed (see for example US National Endowment for Democracy Forum for International Studies web and blog site 'Resurgent dictatorship. The global assault on democracy', at <http://www.resurgentdictatorship.org>).

At one level the terms of the conceptual debate echo an important distinction between *active* and *passive* democracy support: the passive aspect is more concerned with the actual effects on an affected regime than the active focus, which is defined by the external actors' motives and intentions. The efforts by leading autocracies to deliberately influence the type of regime in other countries (for whatever reason) must be kept distinct from any unsought or unintended effects that their international dealings might have on governments or type of regime elsewhere. According to von Soest (2015: 626), who offers useful distinctions between diffusion (a form of contagion that is unintended), learning, collaboration and support, it is also important to differentiate between on the one hand general collaboration among authoritarian regimes themselves and on the other hand specific collaboration aimed quite deliberately at countering democratization pressures. Vanderhill (2013: 14) claims that autocracy promotion differs fundamentally from democracy promotion in so far as only the latter seeks to socialise foreign partners into its own values and to further political regimes that will reflect those values (namely freedom and democracy). However this claim should not blind us to the possibility of an authoritarian ruler or regime supporting another authoritarian or semi-authoritarian regime out of a genuine belief in the intrinsic merits of this type of regime. There may be a sincere conviction that it has superior capability to secure political and social order particularly in the face of significant internal challenges. This includes challenges posed by severe ethnic, religious or sectarian cleavages and those imposed by the social and economic restructuring needed to cope with rapid technological change in a globalising world.

Many of the fairly small group of scholars who write about this developing field of inquiry judge that the deliberate support of autocracy as a value in itself is fairly modest. It certainly

does not compare with the longer and more extensive history of *active* democracy support. Moreover in Tansey's (2016a: 154) view much of what has been called autocracy promotion should really be called democracy prevention or democracy resistance, instead. In China's case, Chen and Kinzelbach (2015) use the term democracy 'blocker'. A prominent view of the motives that lie behind the external conduct of leading autocracies especially in nearby countries is that securing political stability there is a major primary concern, irrespective of the type of regime, so long as stability is reckoned to be most advantageous (Bader *et al.* 2012; Babayan and Risse 2015). This helps explain China's support for North Korea's dictatorship, where the CCP's International Liaison Department maintains a continuing relationship with the Korean Workers Party. If autocracy abroad is supported largely for self-serving reasons, then only a few cases are characterised by the desire to advance a shared ideology of political economy – Venezuela's anti-capitalist (and anti-US) agenda in Nicaragua and elsewhere is probably the most noted example (Vanderhill 2013). But just as autocracy support does not set out to win converts to autocratic values, so the leading autocracies – countries whose political regimes diverge markedly from one another – show variation in their own foreign policy behaviour. This contrasts with the shared goal of furthering democracy and democratic transformation that many western powers profess. But naturally individual western countries too have instrumental and self-regarding reasons of their own for wanting to see democratic progress elsewhere in the world.

A corollary of the view that stable relations with stable regimes is a typical default drive of autocracies when they look outside is that leading autocracies will endeavour to weaken a foreign regime or government – or will want to undermine its chances of democratic development (and might actively endeavour to counter western counter democracy support there) – if the leading autocracy's own rulers and/or how they frame their own country's vital interests feel threatened. An example is President Putin's anxiety that Ukraine's 'orange revolution' in 2004–5 could spread to Russia and thereby undermine his rule. This chimed with Russian state fears that western-orientated democracy in Ukraine could compromise Russia's national security, by removing a territorial buffer against NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organisation) powers and, specifically US imperialism. These considerations help explain both Putin's increasing assault on freedoms at home and Russian efforts to weaken or

fragment Ukraine especially in the wake of the Euromaidan uprising against President Yanukovitch, in 2014 . Similar reasoning helps explain both Russia's economic support for President Lukashenko's autocratic rule in Belarus, and its economic embargoes on Georgia where there has been a tilt to the West.

Of course, western countries too fear the effects of foreign instability. The confused and conflicting responses of EU member states to the upsurge of refugees fleeing violence in Syria and Iraq in mid-2015 illustrate the point. In an increasingly multipolar world, where a fragile state can jeopardize the stability of an entire region, the West cannot be expected to give priority to furthering democracy everywhere, except, perhaps except in the long run. The reshaping of US foreign policy under President Donald Trump now looks almost certain to row back from the leading role the US has taken in international democracy support generally – and party support specifically – up until now. In the 1990s the US and the West were very much more confident that their core political ideals would enjoy growing international supremacy. But now, a number of western democracies have genuine cause to be worried not just about the resilience and increase in power of some leading autocracies but about the current and future condition of their own democracy too.

Needless to say, apart from any *active* autocracy support that a leading autocracy might practice abroad there is no reason to doubt that their international dealings can have external effects on governments and regimes in other countries. These effects might serve to maintain or actually increase autocracy, or undermine a vulnerable democracy and its chance of making progress, or infuse a democracy's development with more illiberal dimensions. Authoritarian governments such as those in Zimbabwe and Sudan have been emboldened to resist the democratic and good governance conditionalities as well as the economic policy conditionalities that are typically demanded by western aid donors in return for their aid. Dramatic growth in their exports to or aid and commercial investment inflows from China make this possible. No less important has been insistence by China (and, less convincingly, Russia) that the principle of individual state sovereignty should be respected by western powers including their democracy promotion agencies. This message is well received by regimes that oppose (liberal) democracy and want to deflect western-inspired efforts to engineer political reform in their country. And as Cooley (2015: 60) remarks in respect of China's and Russia's

growing provision of global media, there is now 'more contention over the normative foundations of the international order (with nonliberal voices having a bigger say than before), more authority for counternorms such as noninterference in countries' internal affairs, and more influence for various authoritarian alternatives to liberal democracy'. At the same time the outstanding economic progress that China has achieved in the absence of liberal democracy sends an international message that is often likened to a form of soft power. This is unaffected by the plausible claims of expert commentators that China's leaders have no desire to export any particular political or economic model, but rather use the CCP's International Liaison Department to put China's view of the world across to political parties as well as governments in other countries.

The important point is that these and other international developments—rather than just instances that are incontrovertibly cases of *active* autocracy support aimed at opposing democracy's progress – should all be taken into consideration when exploring the comparative politics of countries that could be affected. The combined net effect of taking everything into account – and not simply international democracy support – is undoubtedly complicated, and may be hard to assess. This conclusion is amplified if we take note of Börzel's (2015: 527) notion of 'crossed-over empowerment' – which refers to seemingly perverse (but plausible) scenarios where in practice 'illiberal regional powers strengthen liberal domestic forces and western democracy promoters stabilize non-democratic regimes'. Such effects might come about directly or indirectly. And they might not always be unintended. Politicians inside a country on the receiving end of such international attention will use and abuse the diverse conflicting and competing external forces to pursue their own advantage, the result being constitutive of who finally prevails – and for how long – in domestic power struggles. The regime or change of regime might or might not be fundamentally altered. Very similar points could be made about the party politics specifically, in countries where a degree of party contestation or competition exists. This will be explored in Part II of the paper, after first providing a shorthand summary of principal similarities and differences between democracy support and autocracy support.

### **Comparing autocracy support and democracy support**

A summary of principal similarities and differences between democracy support and autocracy support would look like the following (adapted from Burnell 2017).

### **Similarities**

*Actors:* not all democracies and not all autocracies are fairly *active* supporters abroad, but in all cases there is minimal domestic opposition to policy—although for different reasons: in democracies voters give consent; in autocracies public dissent is discouraged or disallowed.

*How:* the regime type in all affected states may be influenced directly or indirectly, intentionally or unintentionally.

*Mechanisms:* international support can be economic; financial; commercial; technical cooperation, including sharing of governance models and techniques (e.g. for organizing intelligence services and carrying out internet surveillance, in autocracy support); diplomatic cooperation and collaboration through membership of inter-governmental and regional organizations (e.g. China, Russia and others in the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation); withdrawal/denial of support may also be used to pursue political ends (e.g. western countries imposed economic sanctions against Myanmar's military rule, and Russia has manipulated oil and gas supplies to Ukraine and Belarus).

*Effects:* the actual regime consequences in affected countries do not necessarily comport with – and may even contradict – the external actors' desires or intentions including intentions to influence regime type in a particular direction (Way 2015, Delacour and Wolczuk 2015, and Tolstrup 2015 all draw attention to the counterproductive effects from Putin's perspective of Russian interference in Ukraine and Georgia).

*Explaining the result:* exploring the interactions between domestic actors and *all* external actors – including, where relevant, democracies and autocracies too – can be crucial to understanding the power balance among different domestic actors, and, possibly, explaining the type of regime too.

### **Differences**

*Actors:* different sets of countries seem to lie behind autocracy support on the one hand and democracy support on the other (although in practice western democracies have often

supported authoritarian and semi-authoritarian governments where they judged this was in their own interests – the so called ‘democratic black knights’ surveyed by Ambrosio 2015. The US has prominence). The political differences among different core autocracies exceed those prevailing among western democracy-support countries, even though not all the established democracies share identical democratic features.

*Why:* whereas democracy support ostensibly aims to achieve a specific regime outcome (liberal democracy) as a value in its own right, the customary view of autocracy support is that it is usually an instrumentally grounded policy beholden to the interests of their own government or regime (e.g. Putin’s rule) and/or national interests (e.g. Russia’s national security).

*What:* autocracy support does not purport to offer and does not provide a (single) transferable model of a type of regime, in contrast to democracy support that seeks to advance (liberal) democracy.

*Where:* whereas active autocracy support’s main focus is usually on its own backyard (e.g. Russia in post-Soviet countries; Iran in Syria, Lebanon, Yemen and Iraq; Saudi Arabia in the Arab world), all non-democracies or weak/struggling democracies everywhere are in principle potential (even though not actual) candidates for democracy support. Even so, China’s proliferating international (economic) ties may have unintended regime consequences far and wide, in Africa for instance.

*Mechanisms:* autocracy support has used coercion (e.g. Saudi Arabia crushed Bahrain’s popular uprising in 2011, out of a desire to check Iranian influence), but democracy assistance is non-coercive (although some critics see US and allied military efforts to force ‘regime change’ in Iraq and Afghanistan as part and parcel of democracy promotion. And the employment of negative conditionalities, meaning sanctions or threats of sanctions in the event of non-compliance, as a tool of democracy promotion may be coercive in its own way, such as when it threatens to cancel promises of economic aid crucial to well-being. In contrast the employment of positive conditionalities, meaning incentives, inducements or rewards or offers of the same in return for compliance is, arguably, much less coercive, especially when these conditionalities can be ignored without disappointing legitimate expectations or incurring excessive burdens. A separate point is that democracy support seems to proceed through a

greater variety of organizations that including formally independent non-governmental organizations (NGOs), although autocratic regimes may create pseudo-nongovernmental organizations and give them a role in state-sponsored international missions.

*International legitimation:* whereas the United Nations (UN) endorses democracy and formally engages in support for democratic governance in many countries, it neither endorses autocracy nor actively promotes autocratic rule. At the same time it enshrines principles of national sovereignty and non-interference in international law.

*Studying comparative politics:* relations between autocracies can be opaque and reliable independent evidence patchy, which contrasts with studying political behaviour of democracies (Even so, the diplomatic channels of democracy support and the inner workings of democracy assistance are not always transparent. The lack of transparency extends to the relationships that democracy assistance by western NGOs and political party foundations have with their own government's foreign policy establishment).

In conclusion to this part of the paper, new scholarship takes note of the (potential) influence exercised by some leading authoritarian and semi-authoritarian regimes on government behaviour, regimes and politics more generally in other countries. However, the degree to which autocracies are committed to promoting authoritarian/semi-authoritarian or illiberal rule abroad for its own sake rather than for instrumental or self-regarding ones is debatable. In any case the rapid expansion of international democracy support by western powers in the 1990s did not banish completely a willingness to actively support authoritarian/semi-authoritarian governments abroad. The continuing and massive western arms sales to Saudi Arabia – the world's primary swing state in respect of global oil supplies – is but one example. It obtains extra salience from the Saudi military's attacks on civilian institutions including medical facilities in Yemen, where it seeks to counter Iranian-backed Houthi rebels. Even so, the west's democracy support has yet to devise adequate strategies to counter international autocracy support in all its forms, let alone successfully challenge authoritarian rule inside leading autocracies that are international sources of autocracy support.

Within the overall basket of democracy assistance initiatives, help with developing political parties and forming a stable competitive party systems has been distinctive, even it has not

been the most high profile or best-resourced modality. Indeed, Carothers (2006) found little evidence for it making a transformative impact. And academics like Lars Svåsand and others have also cast doubt on its effectiveness (Mathisen and Svåsand 2001; Burnell 2006; Burnell and Gerrits 2012, including chapter 9 by Rakner and Svåsand; Svåsand 2015, and Svåsand and Schakel 2015). Nevertheless, the question must be asked is there a different story to tell in regard to party support by ‘bad guys’? The answer to that question might even flag up greater challenges to democracy support generally and for its party support specifically than was previously realised.

## **Part II: Party support by ‘bad guys’**

This part uses the account of similarities and differences between democracy support and autocracy support sketched above to tease out a provisional framework for investigating party support from autocracies, where new empirical research could then lead on to an informed comparison with the substantial knowledge and critical understanding that already exists about party support by democracies and such international organisations as the democratic governance programme of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP).

In theory we could construct a simple matrix that would offer four main cells – support from democracies to democracies; from democracies to autocracies; from autocracies to democracies; and from autocracies to autocracies – and then position different cases of cross-border party support into one or another of these cells in accordance with how the political regime of each country is characterised. However, such simplicity hides a number of meaningful variables that could be of close interest when comparing examples of party support in the real world. The point is not just that many countries are better characterised in terms of some intermediate type of regime, rather than as either a democracy or an autocracy (countries that count as democracies differ greatly among themselves in respect significant indicators of democraticness and freedom; and a comparable observation applies to countries styled as autocracies, too), or that the direction of a regime’s political trajectory (towards or away from democracy) might be highly relevant too (an example being Turkey. At the outset of the so called ‘Arab spring’ in early 2011 Turkey was touted as a potential role model for democratisation in an Islamic society. Indeed, Turkey began to conduct democracy dialogues



with a number of Islamic societies such as Tunisia that were looking to external support in their attempt to undertake democratic transition. But just a few years on from then, the increasingly autocratic tendencies displayed by Turkey's President Erdoğan, the accelerating erosion of civil liberties and narrowing scope for peaceful political opposition are such that Turkey now offers lessons in how to retreat from liberal democracy). An additional point when examining party support says we might want to distinguish among the parties in accordance with *their* own commitment to liberal democratic norms and values. This point applies not simply to Turkey's own ruling AKP (Justice and Development Party), but more especially to parties in countries that are receiving rather than providing foreign support. Democracies as well as democratising countries may house individual parties whose agendas or intentions include elements that are hostile to liberal democracy or would prove damaging to liberal democracy if the party gained power. But these need not be the only parties that attract the interest of autocracies. Similarly, international democracy support to parties can have credible reasons for seeking foreign partners not only among parties displaying an unshakeable commitment to democracy but also among parties whose democratic convictions or liberal credentials are shaky or ambiguous, at best. So, a more complex and multi-dimensional matrix would want to take account of any mismatch between the parties' political values and the values that denote or are embedded in the political system as a whole, and of the parties' own direction of political travel too.

In practice a multi-dimensional matrix would probably contain some cells that are devoid of real world content. One example of a cell that might exist mainly or perhaps only as a theoretical construct, would designate democracy support to anti-democratic parties holding the reins of power in non-democracies. This is rarely offered and is unlikely to be accepted (unless in extreme bad faith), except where such support is a condition for being allowed to aid opposition parties with a democratic reform agenda. A second example of a cell that might be empty could apply to democratically-inclined parties in countries where the government practices illiberal rule, who may be in no position to offer democracy assistance to parties elsewhere even if they would like to receive democracy support from outside. In a third possible example of an empty cell, a firmly pro-democratic party in a mature democracy might be expected to refuse public offers of support from any illiberal or antidemocratic source



including foreign governments or political parties, even if offers of support were forthcoming. An external attempt to undermine one or more such parties – as has been alleged in respect of Russian cyber-attacks on parties in several western democracies – looks a more likely scenario. Yet examples of support such as France’s Front National cited earlier in this paper suggest the reality might be more nuanced. The *actualité* could depend not only on the firmness of a party’s commitment to democracy and liberal values but its confidence in being able to handle support without having to comply with unwelcome strings, conditions or conditionalities and, moreover, its judgment of the likely domestic reputational consequences. In fact the receipt by political parties of finance from abroad is illegal in many democracies, including some like the United States whose own democracy support to other countries has regularly transferred material and other resources to parties in emerging democracies. Of course parties – not least those harbouring ambitions or agendas that would undercut democracy or the rule of law – can explore ways of circumventing party finance regulations.

A fourth kind of cell where only few examples might be cited from today’s world (although research might show them to be the tip of a bigger iceberg) denotes situations where a party with significantly illiberal or anti-democratic proclivities in an existing democracy extends fraternal or sisterly support to likeminded parties in another democracy. This would be a modern day equivalent of on the one side the kind of networking among members of the Communist International (Comintern) that took place in the 1920s and 1930s, and on the other side international collaboration among fascist parties in a number of European democracies in the 1930s. How far these relations contributed to the collapse of democracy in such countries as Germany, Italy and Spain in the inter-war period is a matter for historical debate.

A fifth and final example of a cell that might be expected to lack real substance in practice relates to democracy support from a democratic party to another democratic party where both countries are already well-established democracies. However while this may be true in the conventional sense of democracy support as it appears in the literature on international democracy promotion, there is no doubt that friendly relations between parties who are ideological soulmates in western democracies – especially but not only among countries in the European Union – are a long established and well developed phenomenon. Important

consequences could follow for parties individually and for party systems, and for the polities more generally. Moreover, there is plenty of evidence from the world of established democracies of direct attempts by elected governments to influence parties and party politics in other established democracies, when pursuing their foreign policy goals. Israeli government financing of pro-Israel intra-party groupings and political tendencies (such as Young 'Conservative Friends of Israel' and 'Labour Friends of Israel') in the UK's leading parties and diplomatic initiatives against parties or politicians deemed to be unfriendly furnish examples (a recent instance described by MacAskill and Cobain 2017 reports the ambition of an Israeli embassy official in London to 'take down' a junior minister in the UK government's foreign office). Fund-raising for US Congressional candidates and lobbying of the US Congress by the American Israel Public Affairs Committee has been actively encouraged by the Israeli government, over many decades (Mearsheimer and Walt 2007). However, just as the conceptual relationship of activities like these to party aid framed within the context of international democracy support and autocracy support is not straightforward, so the cell of a complex multidimensional matrix that might provide a home for them does not provide the focus of this paper.

Before proceeding further, the point is worth repeating that although democracy support includes many instances of direct support to individual parties – such as by transferring to them material resources and know-how about organisational matters and activities like election campaign strategies, media management, and fund-raising – the situation in respect of support from autocracies may be rather different. The point can be expressed as a first provisional hypothesis:

*Hypothesis 1: autocracy support for the most part touches parties individually and the balance among parties collectively in ways that are more indirect than direct. How this compares with democracy support to parties is a matter for conjecture and further investigation.*

Whereas direct efforts work with parties, indirect efforts work on parties in other ways. An example of indirect influence is the sending of foreign election monitors who are predisposed to report a clean bill of health on an election that may not have been free and fair, so long as

the candidate the autocracy wants to see elected is declared the winner. Advance knowledge that this will happen can affect how (all) political parties behave in the run up to polling day. It may well influence the election outcome and, of course, contribute to the declared winner's claims to a legitimate hold on elected office after. Fraudulent techniques for counting or recording votes after the ballot papers have been cast are indirect influences that can travel across borders too. A government's imitation of foreign legal codes for registering and regulating political parties that deliberately discriminate against political opponents is yet another indirect form of influence, although the direct transfer of such practices as state organised harassment and intimidation of (opposition) politicians sits more on the border between direct and indirect. More straightforward examples of indirect influence can include the borrowing of rules or practices on media access that are designed to penalise political opponents, and arranging state procurement and other public spending practices in ways that benefit only the party in power. And of course there is also the direct funding by foreign aid donors of public projects whose nature and timing are chosen for their usefulness in mobilising political support for the ruling party. This is a scenario associated with for example Chinese aid spending in Africa. But development aid from the West can experience difficulty in avoiding complicity in such an outcome; and the same may be even more true of general budgetary support.

However, compared to what little the literature on autocracy promotion says about parties and their activities, greater coverage can be found there of the means for controlling and closing down civil society activities and the political activities of independent NGOs. But of course this too can have consequences, indirectly, for parties. Civil society's vitality and freedom to function affect the environment in which inter-party competition takes place, as well as impinging more directly on the viability of (opposition) parties whose close links with an NGO or social movement are central to their existence.

### **Similarities**

Of all the similarities between democracy support and autocracy support noted in Part I of the paper, there are three in particular where broadly the same point could be made whether comparing autocracy and democracy support in general or party support specifically.



Thus, while not every democracy has embarked on international democracy support, and even some that have provided democracy assistance have refrained from offering party aid, so there are many autocratic and semi-autocratic regimes that show little interest in offering autocracy support more generally or party support in particular.

Similarly, drawing on the heading of *how*, political parties in affected states just like the political regime as a whole may potentially be influenced either directly or indirectly, and may be influenced either intentionally or unintentionally, irrespective of whether the source of influence is a democracy or an autocracy.

And in respect of *Effects*, the actual consequences for political parties individually in affected countries and their party system do not necessarily comport with and may even contradict an external actors' desires or intentions – including intentions to influence a party or parties in a particular direction. Neither democracy support nor autocracy support can be entirely certain about the final outcome that it will produce, either with respect to the type of political regime (or regime trajectory) generally or the party outcomes more specifically. Even in the realm of party support from autocracies, questions about its effectiveness (in achieving its intended objectives, as distinct from the actual effects) must first try to establish the motivational thinking that lies behind the provision of support. A similar requirement applies to assessing the effectiveness of democracy support to parties too.

The fact that these areas of similarity between autocracy and democracy support to parties can be stated quite briefly and barely seem to warrant the formulation of testable hypothesis, whereas the areas of difference require more space and are expressed below as hypotheses, should not blind us to the importance of the similarities. Furthermore, as will become clearer from the discussion below of differences between autocracy and democracy support to parties there are at least some areas where a clear contrast might be thought to exist but the necessary addition of a few caveats then makes picture less clear cut.

In regard to *Mechanisms*, while there are some similar modalities for reaching out to parties available both to democracy support and autocracy support, there are likely to be some significant differences in practice, too. A second hypothesis is worth investigating here:

*Hypothesis 2: autocracy support makes comparatively greater use of money transfers to fund parties and their election campaigns, relative to other forms of direct support, such as advice on how to advance female candidate selection for intra-party offices and when standing in general elections.*

A supporting argument for this second hypothesis is that autocracies have fewer inhibitions against vote buying, compared to democracies. However, accurate and comprehensive data about financial flows is probably very hard to find for both autocracy and democracy assistance to parties. Most democracy support organisations formally claim they do not transfer cash. Indeed, they may not be legally authorised to do so (Germany's party foundations or *Stiftungen* for instance are not supposed to make grants from the public funds they receive). Anecdotal evidence suggests nonetheless that cash transfers across borders do take place especially at the time of election campaigns. In any case the fungibility made possible when equipment such as computers and photocopiers are given erodes the sharp distinction between money and other kinds of support, although it is true to say that cash can be more easily used for such nefarious purposes as bribing election officials or voters, and making other corrupt and illegal payments. With very few exceptions (such as Southall 2008, on South Africa's African National Congress) the literature sheds little light on monies received from (all sources) abroad even in the case of parties that are behaving within the law and making a constructive contribution to building a new democracy.

Especially where the financial nexus is opaque, the focus of inquiry could turn to a third and much more sweeping hypothesis:

*Hypothesis 3: autocracy support to political parties proceeds mainly by ways and means whose objective is to subvert or undermine free and fair competition, or which has the potential to produce that effect, in comparison to democracy support to parties.*

However the comparison is relative. In principle there may be situations where the party/parties that an autocracy favours have an interest in the non-fraudulent conduct of elections fought on a level playing field, where they might believe they have a good chance

of emerging victorious. Furthermore, the scholarly literature on the West's democracy support makes no secret of instances where considerable efforts have been made to load the dice in favour of the party or parties the west feels most comfortable with, and against parties that it does not want to see in power. This can be because the parties are believed to differ greatly in their commitment to making a success of democratic transition and consolidation. But it can also be because of more self-regarding foreign policy motivations to do with national security, commercial gain, or ideological objections levelled against parties with radical left-wing agendas. The intentionally discriminatory allocation of assistance among parties can impact on how the playing field is viewed by the local contestants, even where not an assault on free and fair competition per se. It can provoke behavioural change by the parties who are not being favoured, including a resort to political violence. This may happen even in situations where the democracy support did not originate as an attempt to counter the autocracy support that rival parties were already believed to receive.

Finally, the point of similarity made at the very end of the list of similarities between democracy support and autocracy support in general, namely *Explaining the result*, can be crucial to understanding not simply the type of regime or regime trajectory in general but also more particular matters pertaining to the parties and party system specifically. That is to say, an exploration of the interactions between domestic actors and *all* external actors – including, where relevant, party support actors from democracies and from autocracies as well (and including the more destructive attention of autocracies, such as cyber-warfare against parties too) could be essential in at least some cases. However, there are also some possible differences to look out for, and these are represented in the fourth and fifth hypotheses below:

*Hypothesis 4: in affected countries, the more pro-democratic parties on the one hand and parties with aims and agendas hostile to freedom and democracy on the other hand will normally have different, mutually exclusive external supporters or channels of support abroad.*

A tweaking of the fourth hypothesis leads to a variant that is the fifth hypothesis:

*Hypothesis 5: overlapping sources of external support are more likely to exist in the case of parties who, although not truly or unreservedly committed to liberal democracy feel comfortable with some weaker version of democracy, say electoral democracy or illiberal democracy, or maybe even parties that would feel at home in a competitive authoritarian regime.*

Evidence that parties are double-dipping across opposing (i.e. democratic and autocratic) external sources of support would be especially intriguing. And the same applies to parties that switch over time, such as from at first obtaining democracy support to later receiving support from autocracies, or move in the reverse direction. Switches can occur due to either a change in the character of the parties and their leaders, or changes in the overall geopolitical situation of the country and its relations with external powers.

## **Differences**

This section follows the template of differences between democracy support and autocracy support in general to identify some possible implications for party support specifically. Although the differences appear to outnumber the similarities already touched on, the differences should not be overstated – at least not until more evidenced is garnered and reviewed. For it will be shown that in at least some cases the contrast may be less clear cut in practice once necessary caveats are added in. The caveats are in part a reflection of shortcomings in our knowledge of autocracy support to parties (and, to a lesser degree, the limits to what we know about democracies' party support, too), and in part reflect fundamental differences in how democracy support to parties is understood and interpreted by practitioners and independent analysts. The fact is that in addition to the defects or blemishes that might be quite unique to party support from the West that activity has not escaped the more sweeping criticisms that have been levelled at democracy promotion more generally, from the likes of critical theory. One example, then, suggests that democracy promotion provides a vehicle for exporting neo-liberal economic models to countries for whom the adoption of free market capitalism and closer integration into the global economy may well not offer the most appropriate solutions (for example Bridoux and Kurki 2014).

In respect of the first point of difference identified in the list of similarities and differences presented in Part I – namely *Actors* – research could seek to establish what difference (if any) the specific form of regime in a leading autocracy (different forms being personalistic, party-based, and military-backed) makes to party support abroad, in addition to investigating how the kind of party support that autocracies provide is affected by the political regime and regime trajectory of the countries they seek to influence. A sixth hypothesis tries to capture this point:

*Hypothesis 6: the specific type of autocratic regime matters for whether it engages in international party support and produces more variation compared to the leading international democracy support actors.*

If we can safely assume that there are fewer countries providing autocracy support than democracy support, then one implication is that parties looking for support from the former have fewer choices. This could mean they risk becoming more dependent on perhaps just one or two sources (in the case of Andean countries for example, on Cuba and Venezuela, where the former provides organisational and technical assistance and the latter has offered subsidised oil and cheap state loans). Parties in search of democracy support can approach more potential partners abroad and hope to become less reliant on any one, although not all emerging or prospective new democracies are favoured equally by international offers of democracy support. Moreover the main sources of autocracy support tend to concentrate on their regional neighbours, whereas agencies of international democracy support including party support collectively spread their efforts quite far and wide. So parties in a county like Moldova, in which China, Saudi Arabia, Iran and Venezuela have little or no interest, is probably more exposed to Russian interference in its party landscape (Russia having taken an interest in backing separatist forces in Moldova's Transnistrian region which has a border with Ukraine). Parties there may be more vulnerable to the costs of accepting external support from Russia, when compared to parties in countries that are typically offered democracy support by a plurality of western governments, as well as formally non-governmental actors and also multinational or intergovernmental sources such as the European Union and UNDP.

The second main point of difference between autocracy support and democracy support (*Why, or what motivates support*) offers rich potential for comparative research into what this means for party support. As with both autocracy and democracy support more generally, some instances of autocracy support to parties appear to have come about as a reaction to the West's provision of democracy support to rival (pro-democratic, or western oriented) parties, in the affected countries. There may be connections with the third hypothesis already introduced, which says autocracy support proceeds mainly by ways and means that aim to subvert or undermine free and fair competition, or are likely to have that effect. An unsurprising finding would be that the democracy support handbooks on how political parties should play the game democratically especially in respect of electoral contestation have a counterpart in manuals of 'dirty tricks' – machinations that can be transferred to parties and politicians disposed to act undemocratically or against democratic rules and procedures if they judge doing so is necessary to achieving their ends.

Building on the above, a seventh hypothesis tries to establish whether the political calculations that underlie autocracies' choices about which parties are worth supporting proceeds from a different basis than that which underpins democracy support for parties:

*Hypothesis 7: whereas democracy support especially favours parties that are believed to become capable of cementing democratic transformation – by virtue of being popular as well as having a strong commitment to democracy (what might be called an exercise in spotting 'winners') – so the objects of autocracy support will include not only trusted cronies already in positions of power (Russia's support for Ukraine's President Yanukovitch being an example) but also parties who are not sufficiently popular to have a chance of forming a government by themselves ('losers' in that sense) but who can still act as 'spoilers' or 'Trojan horses'.*

'Spoilers' have the potential to destabilise politics and society, or impede the democratic momentum. 'Trojan horses' here means the potential to secure a bridgehead representing the leading autocracies' foreign policy objectives, in the event they become minority partners in a coalition government. In practice the distinction between 'spoilers' and 'trojan horses' can

become blurred. For example one way of understanding Russian activities is to impute a goal of undermining the political strength and stability of western democracies, in order both to lessen the appeal of liberal democracy to Russian society and to undermine the ties of political, security and military cooperation among western democracies, which the Kremlin perceives are an existential threat to Russia. Furthermore, the caveat is worth repeating that in so far as western democracy support has been shaped and directed by instrumental reasons based on national security or economic objectives, the true extent of the difference between autocracy and democracy support to parties need not always be very clear cut in practice. Leaving aside the issue of politically partisan choices that inflect a significant proportion of all party aid (from parties in the West and from Germany's *Stiftungen*, for example), the academic literature on international election observation and monitoring suggests that western democracy support actors have sometimes been influenced by partisan considerations when constructing their verdict as international election observers on an election's conformity to international (western-derived) standards (Kelley 2012).

The third general point of difference between autocracy support and democracy support identified in Part II – *What* – could have implications for party support that run parallel to the diversity of forms among the leading types of autocratic regime and its effects. These regimes vary from the highly personalist nature of Hugo Chávez's rule in Venezuela and (increasingly over time) Putin's dominance of the political landscape in Russia to the supremacy held by the CCP in China, and the absolute hereditary monarchy of Saudi Arabia. Presumably, leading autocracies that have little or no experience of political parties or significant inter-party competition themselves are the least well equipped to give advice and training to parties in other countries. Of course this need not preclude transfers of money let alone diplomatic interventions in favour of a particular party. A plausible, eighth hypothesis then, suggests that even if the individual characteristics of the regime in a leading autocracy do not affect whether it decides to advance autocracy support (because some other reasons account for its behaviour), those characteristics will matter in other ways for party support:

*Hypothesis 8: characteristics of the regime in a leading autocracy matter not simply for whether or not it offers party support but for the existence of a preference between direct versus indirect methods of influence.*

To illustrate, a leading authoritarian or competitive authoritarian regime like Russia that its critics say is well versed in electoral fraud, voter coercion or vote buying is perhaps more likely to be knowingly complicit in transferring these or similar activities abroad than is an monarchy like that in Saudi Arabia, where electoral politics make little impression on the executive. But again there is a caveat worth acknowledging: funds received from Saudi Arabia might still be used by, for example, Egypt's elected rulers for the purpose of election-related misbehaviour.

Indeed, an important point of difference between autocracy support and democracy support to parties especially in the case of leading autocracies with strong personal rule could be that support is more likely to be focused on political leaders or party leaders (including in opposition parties) and other cronies (for example Russia and Ukraine's Yanukovitch) than is the case with democracy support and its interest in supporting party institutionalisation. This proposition might hold even where the leader's pathway to gaining or holding onto government office still lies through the political party he/she controls and that party's performance in national elections. The point can be expressed as a ninth hypothesis, while allowing for the possibility that question of whether a presidential or instead a parliamentary or a hybrid system obtains in the country that is receiving support could well have an impact too.

*Hypothesis 9: the totality of autocracy support is less likely than democracy support to offer encouragement on such specifics such as intra-party democracy and also more generally on party institutionalisation where that would compromise the leader's freedom of action.*

Where party institutionalisation renders the party leader more accountable to the party, he/she is likely to become less responsive to the international sponsor(s). And where an outside autocracy places a high priority on helping an individual leader with whom it feels

comfortable, other specific consequences may follow in regard to the party system. These are captured in the next hypothesis:

*Hypothesis 10: autocracy support is less likely to aim at promoting a plurality of parties, let alone a competitive multi-party system, as objectives in their own right, which contrasts with democracy support's commitment to a competitive party system.*

That said, leading autocracies can be expected to behave opportunistically as local circumstances abroad appear to dictate. And so this can mean helping minor parties, as was outlined above in the context of the seventh hypothesis. And it would be unsurprising if democracy support including party aid at times did not behave opportunistically too.

In regard to *Where* – which countries tend to receive party support or are potential candidates for support from outside – a research agenda that gives priority to the main battleground states, notably where political parties are courted by rival external backers with very conflicting views on the desirability of democracy, suits scholarship on democratisation and on democracy promotion, but will not capture the full canvas. To date the concentration of good case study literature on Ukraine (which is a function of that country's politically strategic position, its relative openness, and the number of very capable researchers with many years of experience studying Ukraine) has a flip side in the paucity of published research on other countries where autocracy support to parties may be a factor.

And as was mentioned above (see *Explaining the result*, under the list of *Similarities*, in Part I), an analytical framework that sets out to explore political interactions between domestic actors in affected countries and different shades of external actor including, where relevant, not just actors from democracies but those from autocracies too, could be crucial to a proper understanding of the power balance among different parties – as well as help explain the type of regime and direction of travel, there. This offers the possibility of reaching a more sophisticated insight into the country's politics than an approach framed more simply in terms of looking for (external) cause and (internal) effect. The value of looking for how politicians and parties in affected countries themselves influence the what, how, when, and to what effect, of the support they receive from autocracies is a lesson to be taken from contemporary

investigations into democracy support more generally. Principals sometimes turn into agents, and agents sometimes become the principal to an extent where it may become difficult to know which term, principal or agent, best describes a specific actor at a given point in time. It is not always easy to apportion responsibility where outcomes are codetermined by multiple and opposing actors, who are all struggling to contend with structural forces as well. This point can be made when assessing the influence of party support from autocracies too.

The fifth point of difference between autocracy support and democracy support listed in Part I – namely *How* – suggests that party support for democracy is likely to come from a variety of different types of actor as well as a potentially larger number of international actors. These can range from departments of government, through semi-autonomous and notionally independent (while still publicly-funded) NGOs such as Germany's *Stiftungen*, to private commercial contractors and, of course, genuinely independent political parties in the West. The eleventh, and final, hypothesis captures the broad idea:

*Hypothesis 11: autocracy support originates from a narrower range of organisations – almost exclusively state actors or organisations that are controlled politically and directed by the state.*

However, this final hypothesis must be regarded as open to qualification, even more so than some of the other hypotheses that dwell on difference. For from what little we know about the sources of autocracy support they seem to include various kinds of actor too: foreign ministries, secret service and intelligence agencies, state or state-backed banks, the apparatus of the ruling political party or 'party of power', state-directed and exclusively state-financed 'non-governmental organisations', and private operators (including cyber-hackers into party documents) who might or might not be acting on orders from the state. Empirical research is needed to confirm how meaningful the eleventh hypothesis really is and its significance. The several strategies available for helping parties by indirect means rather than the more direct forms of party aid could mean that the totality of autocracy support to parties makes use of many different kinds of vehicles and channels, albeit most of them still national rather than inter-governmental, transnational or supranational.

None of the foregoing should lead us to underrate the legal and moral importance of the sixth and penultimate point of difference between autocracy and democracy support, namely *international legitimation*. But the practical value of this point is very much a double edged sword, and its specific application to party support warrants more thought. On the one hand support for the idea of party or party system strengthening as a force for improving democratic governance comes from democratic governance initiatives staged by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). This programme operates mainly through indirect approaches such as developing the electoral system and its processes, parliamentary strengthening, and offering policy support such as for female empowerment. UNDP prefers to stage initiatives like those which help develop codes of conduct for electoral competition and legal frameworks for party fund-raising (and limits on campaign spending, to the exclusion of electoral bribes) at the expense of assisting parties individually or meeting their needs such as capacity development (see UNDP 2005, *A Handbook on Working with Political Parties*. An updated version of the UNDP's detailed 2005 survey *Engagement with Political Parties* is long overdue).

However, on the other hand autocratic governments have long drawn attention to the United Nation's firm commitment to universal principles of national state sovereignty and non-interference by countries in the internal politics of other countries when seeking to protect themselves. Leading autocracies use this legal framework to disallow and discourage western democracy support efforts not only in their own but in other countries too. The proscription could be argued to have extra force in respect of dealing with another country's political parties. For parties and their competition for political power go to the very heart of the domestic political process – something that is true of a larger number and proportion of countries now than is historically the case. Of course this UN framing has not restrained autocracies from seeking to influence politics in countries beyond their borders. That much has been evident since the UN's founding in 1945. And although both the UN's own stated principles and the fact that the UN is an inter-governmental organisation comprised of states restrains the UNDP from offering much direct support to political parties (for the purpose of furthering democracy), neither democracies nor autocracies have felt so inhibited. All things considered, then, the subject of party support sits at the juncture of two conflicting narratives

provided by international legitimation. And for that reason it now merits further investigation into autocracy support no less than democracy assistance.

Finally, what more can be said that is specific to party support when extrapolating from the seventh and final point of difference between autocracy support and democracy support in general – the point about *Studying?* Certainly, better strategies for overcoming obstacles to finding out more about party support by ‘bad guys’ are needed. The lessons of experience of conducting field work into democracy assistance to parties might not be very helpful here. But an expansion of the scholarly literature on party support by ‘bad guys’ is required before there can be a more systematic comparison of the two opposing sides. How different are they, how different are their effects and do they fare equally well or equally badly in terms of achieving what partners to the relationship really want?

Although this paper has offered eleven provisional hypotheses to structure the research, as with all research more detailed specification of what we want to explain or make sense of – the dependent variable – must come first. The effects of party support by ‘bad guys’ on individual parties is one thing, and their effects on the party balance and on the party system are another. The consequences for democracy and democratisation do not have to be our overriding interest or point of concern, even though implications for these may follow. Policy relevance to democracy support offers a yet further take-off point. The past has witnessed some hostility from within the academic community to the idea of democracy promotion, as well as many valid criticisms of the way it has been practiced. There is little clarity now about whether the ending and (in some accounts) reversal of democracy’s so called ‘third wave’, the widespread backlash against democracy promotion around the world, and the growing inclination of some leading autocracies to flex their muscles on the international stage, are leading to a more sympathetic reassessment.

## **Conclusion**

Much of the academic debate about so called autocracy promotion evinces scepticism about whether the motivations and intentions behind the foreign policy behaviour really are aimed at promoting autocracy, rather than addressing some other objective or concern. And the literature rightly points out that at least some such behaviour has proven to be

counterproductive if judged against the actual regime trajectory in the affected country. This is a finding that finds echoes of much longer standing in the study of democracy promotion too. Tansey's (2016b) specification of the dependent variable in his own research as the practice of authoritarian politics within regimes, rather than the type of regime or change in regime, makes a useful start for the purpose of (re)framing investigations into international party support (even though Tansey confines his study to the question of how incumbents in autocracies are helped to remain in power. Of course this leaves out democracies and other countries that are trying to democratise, which is a major limitation). So, a deeper and more locally rooted agenda for researching comparative politics could now be advanced by going on to identify the dependent variable as political parties or their leaders and political competition irrespective of the type of political regime, which would mean paying less attention than hitherto both to the broader consideration of regime trajectory (towards or away from democracy) and to establishing whether the leading autocracy is achieving success in its foreign policy.

However, might we be chasing phantoms? Is there enough party assistance by 'bad guys' to make the effort of researching it worthwhile? The honest answer is we simply do not know. Only more empirical research will help us reach an answer. Ideally that should be inspired not by a simplistic search for external causes of domestic political outcomes, but rather by using a lens that sets out to explore whether, how and how far parties and politicians in one country interact with what may be radically very different external actors inhabiting a diverse assortment of political regimes. And then try to pin down the effects.

It would be foolish to deny there are and or could be circumstances where rulers in autocracies judge that attempting to further the prospects of specific politicians and parties in another country, or trying to frustrate the prospects of certain other parties, might serve their own interests or the interests of their country. A positive view of the merits of authoritarian rule per se may even be a part – if only a relatively small – part of the motivation. Indeed, once we take account of the considerable increase in the number of countries whose governments are now elected (including those where political competition is neither very free nor entirely fair), the likelihood that there will be international party support by 'bad guys' looks entirely credible. It would take the place of support that both autocracies and democracies

used to give to dictators and nondemocratic regimes when these were more prevalent in the world, as during the Cold War era for example.

The suspicion that the most potent way that an autocracy can support a party in another country is by indirect means – with the possible exception of direct transfers of money – does not change the argument for more research in direct support, although even that suspicion must remain speculative in the absence of further investigation. The same broad argument remains valid even though there are undoubtedly other ways whereby autocracies do seek to influence politics abroad – ways that look more powerful and, perhaps, more predictable in their overall effects. Russia's covert military interference in Crimea and eastern Ukraine, and encouragement to the formation of break-away mini-'statelets' like South Ossetia in Georgia and Transnistria in Moldova, are illustrative. And while there is certainly a strong case now for political scientists to study the growing phenomenon whereby populist leaders, parties and movements in some established western democracies are drawing inspiration, encouragement and practical tips from parallel trends under way elsewhere, this too is a research topic that need not preclude research into political party assistance by 'bad guys'. Indeed, theoretical and empirical examination of relationships between these topics could prove highly productive.

Even so, the rigorous testing of hypotheses like those introduced in this paper should not be expected to deliver universal statements. On the contrary, the chances are that the generalisations that receive strongest support from the evidence will be found to apply only to some or maybe even just one of the leading autocracies, and not to all of them at the same time. General statements might apply to just one or a few but not all of the countries on the receiving end of autocracy support. So for example, Russian efforts to influence parties individually and the state of party politics more generally in other countries might vary considerably as between the very different countries where it seems to take a close interest in these matters, and could be quite dissimilar from how, why and with what effect China or Iran or Saudi Arabia or Venezuela engage in relations with political parties abroad. Indeed, a bias in the amount of attention paid to Russia looks very likely, for now, not least because Russian interest in party political contestation in the West is rapidly acquiring the status of a security concern there (for illustration see Polyakova, Laruelle, Meister and Barnett 2016).

But this need not be the driver for all research efforts, and should not be allowed to skew the broader findings. A wider comparative international approach to investigating autocracy aid to parties will enable a more systematic in-depth comparison of autocracy and democracy aid to parties, with the potential for a firmer grip on how different the two really are and what the differences really mean.

Historically, party support has supplied only a relatively modest part of international democracy assistance more generally. Even so, greater knowledge of what that party support is now up against in the form of autocracy aid to parties can only help with assessing the response that international democracy support in general, and its party assistance in particular, decides to make, as well as add to our understanding of developments in politics, political stability and political change in general. Democracy support professionals and practitioners can then choose for themselves what action, if any, they take on the basis of any findings that are reached.

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