PDRI Penn Development Research Initiative DevLab@Penn

Resurgent Authoritarian Influence: Evidence from Machine-Coded Media Data

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Objective

Policy Implications

The RAI data has provided valuable insights to improve our understanding In recent years, the authoritarian governments of Russia and China have inof where, when, and how Russia and China exercise their influence abroad, creasingly used their economic, military, and social might to influence other with important implications for foreign policy. To make these data accescountries. However, a lack of quantitative data limits the ability of policymakers to understand how this influence is being used. To track this influsible to policymakers and civic actors, we launched the RAI Explorer (visualizing changes in RAI data), the RAI Data Dashboard (visualizing the ence, the Machine Learning for Peace (MLP) project created the Resurgent Authoritarian Influence (RAI) data set, which identifies media reporting on 22 influence event types), and the RAI Forecast (visualizing predicted RAI) attempts by these powerful autocracies to exert influence abroad. In this activity up to 7 months into the future), available on the Machine Learning report, we use the RAI data to understand the scale, impact, and implicafor Peace project website (mlpeace.org). In the future, we hope these tools tions of RAI. will help decision makers better understand the security challenges posed by increased influence from powerful authoritarian governments and develop **Questions and Approach** better policies for promoting democracy around the world.

The RAI dataset tracks 22 events indicating foreign influence by Russia and China by scraping articles from more than 300 credible online news sources based in almost 60 countries and publishing in nearly 40 languages. This original corpus of nearly 100 million articles provides an unprecedented record of reporting by high-quality, domestic news outlets for developing countries. After using open-source tools to translate articles into English, MLP uses a large-language model (LLM) fine-tuned by our team to identify articles reporting on our 22 foreign influence events. We then summarize the amount of reporting on each RAI event for each country on a monthly basis. To simplify the analysis, we also organize these 22 events into six distinct



themes, including: soft power, hard power, economic power, diplomacy, domestic interference, and backlash.

In a recent report produced for the the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), we investigate how Russia and China use different tools to exert influence, their evolving spheres of influence, and the extent to which authoritarian influence is increasing over time. In the report, we also test the performance of machine learning forecasting models trained to recognize historical patterns between RAI activity, domestic political events, and local economic conditions in order to predict where and when RAI activity is likely to increase in the near future.

Findings

By comparing levels of RAI activity across countries, we identified the relative influence of Russia and China across countries, showing that Russia's influence has historically been concentrated on its neighbors, while China's influence has had a more global reach. However, these geographic spheres of influence have shifted over time, and coverage of Russian influence now rivals that of China in many places, effectively eroding China's dominance in regions like Sub-Saharan Africa.

We also used our data to analyze the volume of reporting on the specific tools that Russia and China use to influence other countries. Figure 1 depicts the prevalence of reporting on these themes over the twelve years covered by our data. For both Russia and China, tools related to the use of economic influence have been the dominant tool reported on in the vast majority of countries. However, this dominance has decreased in recent years, with the use of diplomacy becoming the most frequently reported influence event in many places (see the bottom panel in Figure 1). Finally, we see evidence for a large increase in reporting on RAI events for both Russian and Chinese beginning in 2022. The increase in activity is larger for Russia, and is driven by increased use if diplomacy concentrated in countries where their previous levels of activity were relatively low. Importantly, this increase in influence began in January, just one month before the invasion of Ukraine in February. This may indicate Russia's use of diplomacy to court allies and mitigate international backlash.

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Figure 1:Share of RAI activity across RAI themes by country, measured as the normalized share of all articles reporting on RAI events that correspond with each theme.

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Additional Information

- Click here to read the full report
- Email us at mlpeace-devlab@sas.upenn.edu
- Find us online at mlpeace.org