

THE CURRENT PERSPECTIVE ON SHARP POWER: CHINA AND RUSSIA IN THE ERA OF (DIS)INFORMATION

LA PERSPECTIVA ACTUAL DEL PODER AFILADO: CHINA Y RUSIA EN LA ERA DE LA (DES)INFORMACIÓN

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SUMMARY: I. SHARP POWER AND THE NEW GLOBAL ERA. II. REASONS FOR THE EMERGENCE OF SHARP POWER. III. THE CONFRONTATIONS OF CHINA AGAINST WORLD GEOPOLITICS. IV. RUSSIA'S ATTEMPT TO DESTABILISE EUROPE. V. THE DISINFORMATION CAMPAIGN CAUSED BY THE SARS-COV-2 PANDEMIC. VI. THE OFFENSIVE OF AFFECTED COUNTRIES IN RESPECT TO SHARP POWER. VII. THE THORNS OF SHARP POWER FOR WESTERN DEMOCRACIES. VIII. CONCLUSIONS.

ABSTRACT: Digital and technological development has led to the so-called 'era of information', which affects all fields and has increased international tension between countries like the People's Republic of China and its model based on 'socialism with Chinese characteristics', or the Russian Federation, which makes use of cyberspace media for political purposes, as opposed to liberal democracies, especially the United States and the European Union.

With the aim of finding a way to adapt the theoretical framework of power to reality, in 2017 a new term and concept was developed within the hard and soft power spectrum: sharp power, understood as hard power that uses means typically associated to soft power, with apparently no intention to obtain power, in which a degree of discretion is a notable factor.

To address this matter, I will begin with the analysis of the growing difficulty to distinguish between the means intended to be used as hard power tools and those that are not, starting with current approaches in this complex international scenario. If liberal democracies, especially the United States and the European Union, mistakenly come close to the sharp power of China and Russia, it could have negative consequences for the modern-day world.

RESUMEN: El desarrollo digital y tecnológico ha desembocado en la denominada "era de la información", la cual afecta a todos los ámbitos y ha incrementado la tensión internacional entre países como la República Popular de China y su modelo basado en el "socialismo con características chinas", o la Federación Rusa con la utilización de medios del ciberespacio con fines políticos, frente a las democracias liberales especialmente Estados Unidos y la Unión Europea.

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En búsqueda de una adaptación del marco teórico del poder a la realidad, en 2017 se desarrolló un término y concepto nuevo dentro del espectro del poder duro-blando, el Sharp power, entendiendo por este aquel poder duro que utiliza medios típicamente asociados al poder blando, o aparentemente sin intención de poder, y en el que destaca un grado de discreción.

Partiré para ello del análisis en la creciente dificultad para distinguir entre los medios utilizados con intención de poder duro y los que no, comenzando por los acercamientos actuales en este complejo escenario internacional actual. Un acercamiento equivocado por parte de las democracias liberales, especialmente Estados Unidos y la Unión Europea, al poder afilado de China y de Rusia, puede tener consecuencias negativas para el mundo actual.

KEYWORDS: Sharp power, authoritarianism, democracies, international politics, interventionism.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Sharp power, autoritarismos, democracias, política internacional, intervencionismos.

I. SHARP POWER AND THE NEW GLOBAL ERA

Sharp power, as a way to exercise power, poses an unmistakable threat to democratic states. Due to the particular features that characterise interactions between states within the context of the globalisation era, the application of sharp power increases this threat. This study, carried out using the descriptive analytical method, shows the dangerous situation faced by our society in order to establish strategies and policies aimed towards directly challenging and counteracting the harmful effects derived from the application of sharp power.

From a general perspective, power consists of the capacity to obtain results¹. However, the concept itself is controversial and it is therefore difficult to formulate a universal acceptance of the term. For example, Moisés Naím understands the ‘*ability to direct or prevent the current or future actions of other groups and individuals*’², whereas Max Weber defined power as the ‘*possibility of imposing one’s will upon the behaviour of another*’³ or, as affirmed by Joseph Nye, ‘*the people’s choice of definition reflects their interests and values*’⁴.

Power is both the capacity to do things and the ability to make other people do what we want or pursue to achieve our goals; consequently, the term could be identified with ‘influence’. When specifying the power exercised by someone, its field and scope need to be defined. Since power assumes a relational nature in what is known as ‘power relations’, the victim’s thoughts must be born in mind, as the effectiveness of the power relation exercised on them will depend on what the person thinks. According to Nye,

¹ LUKES, S., “Power”. Contexts, 01-08-2007, retrieved from <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1525/ctx.2007.6.3.59> (accessed 21/06/2020).

² NAÍM, M., “The End of Power: From Boardrooms to Battlefields and Churches to States, Why Being in Charge Isn’t What It Used to Be”, 1st ed, New York, Basic Books, 2013, p. 85.

³ OLIER, E., “Los Ejes del Poder Económico: Geopolítica del Tablero Mundial”, 1st ed, Madrid, Pearson, 2016, p. 73.

⁴ NYE, J. S., “The Future of Power”, 1st ed, New York, Public Affairs, 2011. p. 5.

some of the actions that affect others and lead to successfully achieving the desired goals can be purely destructive without depending on what the victim thinks⁵.

The use of power can have three different dimensions, depending on how it is applied to achieve the desired goals, which Nye calls ‘the faces of power’:

The first face of power⁶ was defined by the political theorist, Robert Dahl, in the 1950s. It focuses on the ability to compel other people to act in the opposite way to their initial preferences and strategies. In order to measure power, it is necessary to know the initial preferences of the other person or nation, and how much they have changed after making the efforts to modify them. Coercion can be quite practical in a situation in which there appears to be a degree of choice.

A decade later, the study of power continued with the political scientists Peter Bachrach and Morton Baratz, who added the ‘second face of power’⁷. Dahl had failed to consider the dimension of what is known as the framing and agenda setting, which consists in the ability to establish the matters to be tackled in the international agenda and impose a series of actions to be carried out in international policy, based on own interest and therefore excluding the preferences of other actors, considering them irrelevant or inappropriate.

In the 1970s, the social theorist Steven Lukes pointed out that ideas and beliefs also help shape the initial preferences of others⁸. In Dahl’s theory, a person can exercise power over another to compel them to do something that otherwise they would not wish to do. However, power can also be exercised over a victim by determining their same desires and goals, shaping the initial or basic preferences in such a way they want the same as the person exercising the power.

But if a person manages to make others want the same results, then coercion would not be required, but neither would imposition in the agenda be necessary. The fact that an actor has a higher number of resources available will not imply they always carry out actions with the aim of ensuring the success of a specific goal. Lukes called this characteristic the third face of power⁹.

Neither does Nye deny the importance of resources in respect to power. Resources are an intimidating element when addressing the rest of the actors. However, the successful result of the actions will depend on the use of the available resources, whether there are plenty or just a few. This can be summarised in the capital concept of *power conversion*, consisting in achieving the desired results from the available resources.

There are several ways to affect or influence the behaviour of other people, depending on the face of power deemed convenient to apply in a relationship. The possible ways to

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

exercise power are abbreviated in the terms hard power and soft power.

Hard power consists in using military and economic power with the aim of changing the other party's stance¹⁰. At international level, it would consist in transmuting the first face of power towards the other actors through economic or military coercion, in order to achieve the desired actions from the other party.

Thirty years ago, Joseph Nye introduced the concept of soft power, which uses attraction as a means to achieve power; in other words, change the way other people behave in order to obtain the desired results. At that moment, an opportunity appeared to analyse a State's authority as something more than the resources or capacities it possesses, where it is becoming increasingly more complicated to know which economic, institutional or cultural assets pose a threat of hard power.

There are occasions when the desired results can be achieved without tangible threats or reprisals, not through coercion but assimilation, persuasion or conviction, which are also consciously applied. The attractiveness of culture, or the political or social ideas of a country are discarded¹¹. Furthermore, provided everyone else views the policies of the country in question as legitimate, soft power is strengthened. In this regard, soft power would be identified as the third face of power, insofar as it is supported by the ability to shape other people's preferences. This is based on the power of attraction, conviction and diplomacy, among other factors.

Unlike the foregoing, this concept does not imply using power consciously, given that on the majority of occasions, it exercises persuasion by itself as it is considered attractive by the other actors. It is also necessary to mention the use of trade in soft power matters. According to Nye, commerce is '*only one of the ways in which culture is transmitted*'¹².

Nye explains that when discussing the military, people usually tend to think in terms of the resources of hard power dynamics in the fight and threat of attack. However, this military power can also be used as a soft power element to create a good image in front of friends and allies when sending troops to defend or help. Even the fact of fighting next to allies can be understood as a soft power element, which will result in sending out a positive image and can also be used for persuading and attracting in global policy¹³.

Thus, the coercive use of hard power through military resources is usually accompanied by a certain degree of soft power. The harmonious use of hard and soft power results in what the author refers to as smart power¹⁴. Paraphrasing Niccolò Machiavelli and his advice to Italian princes when he told them that it is better to be feared than loved, Nye states that in the world today it is better to be both at the same time. Information is power

¹⁰ NYE, J. S., "Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics", 1st ed., New York, Public Affairs, 2004, p. 5.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 13.

¹³ NYE, J. S., "The Future of Power", 1st ed, New York, Public Affairs, 2011. p. 25.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

and, thanks to current telecommunications technology, information is widely and quickly disseminated. The formula for international commerce without distortion or tension will provide everyone with net benefits, although interdependent relationships always come at a cost, given that this phenomenon restricts autonomy. However, it is impossible to specify a priori whether the benefits of a relationship will exceed the costs.

Political leaders usually affirm that interdependence implies a natural necessity derived from economic activity, in which the conflicts of interest are reduced to its cause, with the response to global issues residing in cooperation, as *'We are all engaged in a common enterprise. No nation or group of nations can gain by pushing beyond the limits that sustain world economic growth. No one benefits from basing growth on tests of strength'*¹⁵.

The rhetoric of interdependence suggests that conflicts of interest are a thing of the past. This concept is based on the idea that in view of the challenge to ensure the survival of the human race with environmental threats, the conflicts of interest between states and people would not exist, given that the common goal to overcome the challenge would prevail over individual interests. To make this theoretical formulation happen, there would have to be three conditions that rarely occur at global level: the international economic system would have to depend on an endangered environment, all the countries would have to be significantly vulnerable to this catastrophe, and there would have to be only one possible solution to the problem, putting aside space for conflicts about how to resolve it or who has to bear the costs.

Complex interdependence conceives an archetypical scenario, radically opposed to that of realism in its main postulates. Although it does not deny the importance of power and the interests of international actors, it includes new differences as regards its conception, due to the fact that they all dependant on each other.

In recent years, a different aspect of power has gradually been becoming more relevant, especially hand in hand with 'authoritarian' countries¹⁶. Specifically, the Russian Federation and the People's Republic of China, mainly, have deployed efforts with the aim of interfering in the operations of democratic institutions in western countries. For example, the government of Beijing has focused on promoting or fostering support of its antidemocratic policies by suppressing the voices that criticise the Chinese Communist Party beyond the country's borders. On the other hand, the Russian authorities rather than inclining towards making their political system seem more attractive in the eyes of the world, they prefer to attack the image of democracy, achieving their purpose by taking note of the integrity of democratic systems, as well as the ideas supporting them¹⁷.

¹⁵ KEOHANE, R. O. & NYE, J. S., "Power and Interdependence", 4th ed., Boston, Pearson, 2011, p. 6.

¹⁶ THE ECONOMIST, "Global democracy has another bad year", 22 January 2020, retrieved from <https://www.economist.com/graphic-detail/2020/01/22/global-democracy-has-another-bad-year> (accessed 20/05/2020).

¹⁷ WALKER, C., KALATHIL, S. & LUDWIG J., "Forget Hearts and Minds", Foreign Policy, 14-09-2018, retrieved from <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/09/14/forget-hearts-and-minds-sharp-power/> (accessed 15/12/2020).

This cannot be classified as power, as coercion in the form of military force does not come into play, yet neither is it soft power. Which is generally understood as a country's efforts to attract and persuade. Despite their huge efforts to be influential, Russia and China are not particularly successful in worldwide public opinion surveys, so it is worth considering a third dimension of power whose nature is not included in the two previously mentioned terms.

This is the context in which the concept of sharp power is born. The term first appeared in an article published in the magazine, *Foreign Affairs*, written by Jessica Ludwig and the analyst Christopher Walker¹⁸, vice president of the US think tank, National Endowment for Democracy. With the end of the tension resulting from the Cold War, analysts, journalists and legislators, all natives of democratic countries, observed how certain States of a partial or fully authoritarian nature, especially the most influential, Russia and China, continued with their efforts to exercise their influence abroad, going beyond their own borders, using soft power tools. However, some of these techniques, even though they cannot be classified as hard power in a materially coercive sense of the word, their nature prevented them from being included in the soft category.

Sharp power is established as one of the key points within the exercise of hard power, and although it does not exclusively relate to authoritarianisms, it does not mean that its greatest exponents today are not authoritarian. This is proven by the fact that the primary defenders of this concept, Walker and Ludwig, *The Economist* and Nye himself, use it to study China and Russia's power.

Through sharp power, these States do not necessarily seek to win over hearts and minds by using attraction or persuasion, which would be the main goal of soft power mechanisms, but they make an effort to manipulate their target audience by distorting the information it could find out. These efforts to project their own influence, materialising through elements such as the use of media controlled by the state, cultural areas or institutions, think tanks or academic environments, are not made with the intention of sharing ideas, despite the nature of these institutions, but it is rather a case of distraction and manipulation.

For this reason, to continue achieving their goals, the use of force focuses on disrupting or creating confusion, and conflict is perceived in terms of threat and asymmetric war; that is, the exploitation of technology and psychology directed towards the peripheral vulnerabilities of a greater enemy with the aim of subjecting it¹⁹.

Four hundred years ago, Frances Bacon wrote 'information is power'. Indeed, in the context of sharp power in a scenario of interdependence, the actors will seek to take over cyberspace while they manipulate flows of information beyond their borders, to thus increase their power. This can be understood in terms of controlling the results. However, in this situation in which military force loses importance as an instrument to achieve

¹⁸ WALKER, C., "Russian and Chinese sharp power", 08-07-2018, retrieved from <https://www.ft.com/content/648187ce-8068-11e8-af48-190d103e32a4> (accessed 20/07/2020).

¹⁹ NAU, H. R., "Perspectives on International Relations: Power, Institutions, and Ideas", 4th ed. George Washington University, Washington DC, SAGE Publications & CQ Press, 2015, p. 217.

goals, defining each actor's capacity of power in order to predict results turns into a rather more complicated challenge²⁰.

II. REASONS FOR THE EMERGENCE OF SHARP POWER

This concept was born accompanied by an increasingly assertive attitude from Beijing and Moscow in the global panorama. Their skill at exercising influence beyond their borders has created this new scenario that describes the use of censorship and manipulation with the purpose of undermining and weakening the integrity of democratic institutions. Therefore, neither hard nor soft power suitably describe this effect of restricting freedom of expression and distorting the political environment, it is a case of sharp power, insofar as it seeks to penetrate or perforate the political and informational environments of their target countries.

Besides the great challenges faced by the international scenario, namely climate change, international terrorism and organised crime, Chinese leaders include terms in their vocabulary, such as political war²¹ and include different forms of manipulation, which they carry out via the media, academic censorship and foreign policy²².

In 2020, there was a growth in the political tension between liberal democracies and authoritarianisms, despite the fact that in previous years it had already run high. The tension between China and the United States due to the trade war between them and other situations like the South China Sea dispute has become more evident since the Covid-19 crisis. In July last year, the Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo, announced that the United States had ordered China to close its consulate in Houston, to which China later reacted by doing the same with the US consulate in Chengdu. In the same year, China decided to apply the Hong Kong National Security Law (officially 'Law of the People's Republic of China on Safeguarding National Security in the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region'), which increased the tension between other states, especially in the case of the United Kingdom.

However, if there was a characteristic worldwide event in 2020, it was the health crisis caused by the SARS-COV-2 pandemic. This situation was neither exempt from the signs of tension between liberal democracies and authoritarianisms. Trump even insinuated that the virus had come from the Wuhan Institute of Virology²³, apart from the fact that the

²⁰ KEOHANE, R. O. & NYE, J. S., *op. cit.*, p. 9

²¹ COOK, S., KUCHARCZYK, J. & POLYAKOVA, A., "Sharp power: Rising Authoritarian Influence", International Forum for Democratic Studies, 06-12-2017, retrieved from <https://www.ned.org/events/sharp-power-rising-authoritarian-influence/> (accessed 11/12/2019).

²² EL PAÍS, "China usa su red de embajadas para extender el acoso a la etnia uigur", 24-11-2019, retrieved from https://elpais.com/internacional/2019/11/24/actualidad/1574587269_365570.html (accessed 26/11/2019).

²³ BBC, "Coronavirus: Trump stands by China lab origin theory for virus", 01-05-2020, retrieved from <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-52496098> (accessed 02/06/2020).

United States Department of Justice accused Russia²⁴ and China²⁵ of participating in cyber-attacks against American laboratories. In turn, the vaccine developed by Russia against the disease was named ‘Sputnik V, similar to that given to the first satellite in the world, launched by the Soviet Union in 1957 in the ‘space race’ that took place during the Cold War.

The corrosive effects of sharp power are not limited to the world of politics. Apart from in the media, they are currently increasing in the cultural and academic sphere, and in advertising. A key aspect, thanks to which China and Russia are achieving their goals through the application of sharp power, would be making use of the openness of democracies thanks to globalisation, meaning that information and internet access are increasing and authoritarianism has been able to reaffirm its presence and control over the world of ideas.

As regards cultural invasion, the Confucius Institute would pretend to be equivalent to national cultural dissemination institutions, such as the Goethe Institute, Alliance Française or Instituto Cervantes. Universities, core elements of academic freedom and debate, in which Confucius Institutes have been set up in exchange for generous economic contributions, have been forced to self-censor themselves and deliberately avoid discussions on matters considered sensitive by Chinese authorities, such as Tibet, Taiwan and Xinjiang. According to Walker²⁶, they raise suspicion due to the opacity with which they operate in western countries, functioning as ‘the arm of the Chinese state and are allowed to ignore academic freedom’, according to a report by the American Association of University Professors²⁷.

China has developed an economic advantage that it uses as a tool to make others act ‘according to its rules’, often with the goal of limiting freedom of expression²⁸ (Walker, 2018). It seeks to legitimise its position in the international sphere through direct and indirect manipulation and the external censorship of the criticism of its regime. In this regard, it is worth noting how the Beijing government suspended economic relations with the NBA for a value of \$500 million²⁹ (USA Today, 2019) after a general manager of one of the teams posted a tweet supporting democracy in Hong Kong. The NBA was forced to immediately apologise in order to keep its access to the entire Chinese market, thus

²⁴ BBC, “Coronavirus: Russian spies target Covid-19 vaccine research”, 16-07-2020, retrieved from <https://www.bbc.com/news/technology-53429506> (accessed 19/07/2020).

²⁵ UNITED NATIONS DEPARTMENT OF GLOBAL COMMUNICATIONS, “UN tackles ‘infodemic’ of misinformation and cybercrime in COVID-19 crisis”, 31-03-2020, Retrieved from <https://www.un.org/en/un-coronavirus-communications-team/un-tackling-E2%80%98infodemic%E2%80%99-misinformation-and-cybercrime-covid-19> (accessed 01/06/2020).

²⁶ WALKER, C., *op. cit.*

²⁷ GRAHAM, E. J., “Confucius Institutes Threaten Academic Freedom”, American Association of University Professors, September-October 2014, retrieved from <https://www.aaup.org/article/confucius-institutes-threaten-academic-freedom> (accessed 20/03/2020).

²⁸ WALKER, C., *op. cit.*

²⁹ ZILLGITT, J. & MEDINA, M., “As impasse over pro-Hong Kong tweet simmers, what’s at stake for the NBA in China?”, 18-12-2019, retrieved from <https://eu.usatoday.com/story/sports/nba/2019/10/09/nba-china-hong-kong-whats-at-stake/3912447002/> (accessed 11/01/2020).

quelling an act of free expression in an inadmissible manner.

It is precisely because Russia, and particularly China, are so economically integrated in the rest of the world, that the Western World is so vulnerable to this pressure. Taking the example of Greece, which vetoed a European Union condemnation of China's human rights record, after a Chinese company had invested a significant sum of money in the port of Piraeus.

III. THE CONFRONTATIONS OF CHINA AGAINST WORLD GEOPOLITICS

It may be assumed that China's attempt to seek international influence has received a response from the rest of international stakeholders. As seen in the field of economic power and considering one of the ideas of E. Luttwak on geoeconomic matters, in which

China's continuous growth is ultimately threatening the independence of its neighbours, and even that of its peer countries, which will inevitably be countered by geoeconomic tools; that is, strategically motivated, as opposed to mere protectionist commercial barriers, such as investment prohibitions, a general rejection of technology, even restrictions on raw material exports to China if its behaviour is a big enough excuse for this quasi act of war³⁰.

For this reason, the Chinese model makes it difficult to distinguish between its tools that have no intention of hard power and those that do, bearing it clearly in mind in both the United States and the European Union.

The trade war between the United States and China demonstrates the increase of hard power tools, which led to an increase of US average tariffs on Chinese exports, which rose from 3.1% in January 2018 to 21% in September 2019³¹. Later, with the Phase One Trade Agreement³², in February 2020, they were reduced to an average of 19.3%. However, what is really important are the causes of the confrontation, in which among other accusations, Trump repeatedly blamed China of stealing intellectual property from US companies. He even maintained that Chinese students who graduated in the United States could pose a threat, specifically those who had been employed by, studied at, or conducted research at Chinese entities that supported China's MCF strategy (Military-Civil Fusion)³³.

³⁰ LUTTWAK, E., *The Rise of China Vs. the Logic of Strategy*, Harvard University Press, 2012, p. 42.

³¹ BROWN, C., "US-China Trade War Tariffs: An Up-to-Date Chart", Peterson Institute for International Economics, 14-02-2020, retrieved from <https://www.piie.com/research/piie-charts/us-china-trade-war-tariffs-date-chart> (accessed 14-06-2020).

³² OFFICE OF THE UNITED STATES TRADE REPRESENTATIVE, "United States and China Reach Phase One Trade Agreement" 13-12-2019, retrieved from <https://ustr.gov/about-us/policy-offices/press-office/pressreleases/2019/december/united-states-and-china-reach> (accessed 20-06-2020).

³³ WHITE HOUSE, "President Donald J. Trump is Protecting America from China's Efforts to Steal Technology and Intellectual Property", 29-05-2020, retrieved from <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings->

In parallel, Chinese state-owned enterprises (SOEs) were one of the fundamental points for the Trade Agreement between the United States and China, according to Jeffrey J. Schott³⁴ of the Peterson Institute for International Economics, who established that

perhaps the most critical issue that escalated the trade war, China's excessive support of state-owned enterprises (SOEs), was relegated to phase two of the conversations. The Chinese were not willing to discuss it. However, US civil servants are trying to get the European Union and Japan to support proposals to increase subsidy disciplines in the World Trade Organization. They published a draft proposal the day before the agreement was signed between the United States and China, describing the types of reform they expect from China as regards its support of state-owned enterprises. Judging by these demands, the phase two conversations will face rough seas, if they are ever launched.

In this regard, in 2019, the Chinese telecommunications company, Huawei, was added to the Entity List³⁵ by the United States government, which prevented it from trading with any US company, as well as import or export in this country without prior government approval, consequently paralysing Huawei's involvement in the development and construction of 5G networks. On the same day, Trump issued an executive order³⁶ that prevented US companies from carrying out acquisitions, imports, transfers, or installations by foreign entities, whenever determined by the corresponding institution.

However, the confrontation continued in relation to 5G technology, as the possibility of this company developing the 5G networks of democratic countries has been one of the most discussed facts in recent years. In 2018, Australia banned Huawei from providing 5G technology³⁷ and in 2020, the United Kingdom took a similar decision. In the NATO security conference held in Munich last February, the US Secretary of Defence, Mark Esper, warned allies about allowing Huawei technology in 5G network development, affirming that, 'The development of our own secure 5G networks will far outweigh any perceived gains from partnering with heavily subsidized Chinese providers that ultimately answer to Party leadership'³⁸. Although it is understandable that technology that could pose a serious risk cannot be used for the most sensitive and vulnerable elements, it can be guessed that the United States responded to the veto imposed by China of the entry of

statements/president-donald-j-trump-protecting-america-chinas-efforts-steal-technology-intellectual-property/ (accessed 25-06-2020).

³⁴ SCHOTT J., "US-China trade deal disappoints", Peterson Institute for International Economics, 20-01-2020, retrieved from <https://www.piie.com/commentary/op-eds/us-china-trade-deal-disappoints> (accessed 25-04-2020).

³⁵ BUREAU OF INDUSTRY AND SECURITY, Entity List Export Administration Regulation: Supplement, No.4 to Part 744, 2020, retrieved from <https://www.bis.doc.gov/index.php/documents/regulations-docs/2326-supplement-no-4-to-part-744-entity-list-4/file> (accessed 26/09/2020).

³⁶ WHITE HOUSE, Executive Order on Securing the Information and Communications Technology and Services Supply Chain, 2019, Retrieved from <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/executive-order-securing-information-communications-technology-services-supply-chain/> (accessed 15/03/2020).

³⁷ BBC, "Huawei and ZTE handed 5G network ban in Australia", 23-08-2018, retrieved from <https://www.bbc.com/news/technology-45281495> (accessed 20/01/2020).

³⁸ GOLD, H., "UK bans Huawei from its 5G network in rapid about-face" CNN, 14-07-2020, retrieved from <https://edition.cnn.com/2020/07/14/tech/huawei-uk-ban/index.html> (accessed 25-11-2020).

practically all US applications and social media platforms.

However, this case is far from being the only one within democratic countries that have responded to state-owned companies and Chinese investment. In 2018, the German government vetoed the takeover of the engineering company Leifeld Metal Spinning AG by a Chinese firm³⁹. This was the first time that an action of this nature had been carried out in Germany, and the alleged reasons were practically exclusively related to security. According to information published by Reuters⁴⁰, a source of the German government affirmed that, ‘This authorisation allows for vetoing the purchase of a domestic company by a foreign company for security reasons’. Proposals have also been heard in the heart of the European Parliament, in which the leader of the European People's Party, Manfred Weber, during an interview in May 2020 for the German newspaper, *Welt am Sonntag*, suggested that the European Union should temporarily prohibit Chinese investors from buying-out EU companies using the Covid-19 crisis as a reason, as ‘[...] Chinese companies are increasingly trying to buy up European companies that are cheap to acquire or that got into economic difficulties due to the coronavirus crisis’⁴¹.

Talking about sharp power, we go back to China’s strategy with the Confucius Institutes in several countries, such as the United States, when in August 2020 they were classified as a ‘foreign mission’. Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo⁴², referred to them as ‘an entity advancing Beijing's global propaganda and malign influence campaign’. However, the real battle against these institutions started in 2018 with the approval of the US 2019 National Defense Authorization Act, which prohibited funding for American centres that used Confucius Institutes to teach Chinese⁴³; consequently, the different institutions had to choose whether they wished to maintain the collaboration or receive funding from the Department of Defence. In this regard, Human Rights Watch informed that between the approval of this Act and January 2020, Confucius Institutes were closed in 22 universities, with 12 schools noting ‘the need to comply with the act’⁴⁴.

³⁹ BBC, “Chinese takeover of German firm Leifeld collapses”, 01-08-2018, retrieved from <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-45030537> (accessed 06/07/2020).

⁴⁰ REUTERS, “Germany prepared to veto Chinese bid for Leifeld: government source”, 01-08-2018, retrieved from <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-leifeld-yantai-m-a-veto/germany-prepared-to-veto-chinese-bid-for-leifeld-government-source-idUSKBN1KM4D6> (accessed 11/02/2020).

⁴¹ SCHILTZ, B. (2020), “Ein Erdbeben für die Rechtsarchitektur Europas”, *Welt*, 15-05-2020, retrieved from <https://www.welt.de/politik/ausland/plus208027547/Manfred-Weber-kritisiert-EZB-Urteil-des-Verfassungsgerichts.html> (accessed 20/09/2020).

⁴² POMPEO, M., “Designation of the Confucius Institute U.S. Center as a Foreign Mission of the PRC”, U.S. Department of State, 13-08-2020, retrieved from <https://www.state.gov/designation-of-the-confucius-institute-u-s-center-as-a-foreign-mission-of-the-prc/> (accessed 10/11/2020).

⁴³ CONGRESS OF UNITED STATES, Public Law 115–232—, 13-08-2018, retrieved from <https://www.congress.gov/115/plaws/publ232/PLAW-115publ232.pdf> (accessed 11-01-2020).

⁴⁴ LEGERWOOD, R., “As US Universities Close Confucius Institutes, What’s Next?”, Human Rights Watch, 27-01-2020, retrieved from <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/01/27/us-universities-close-confucius-institutes-whats-next> (accessed 25-06-2020).

IV. RUSSIA'S ATTEMPT TO DESTABILISE EUROPE

Distraction and the intention to create confusion are not unheard of in the use of sharp power and, as a result, the role of media characteristic of the Information Age, such as social networks, is important. Russia also uses them with the aim of intervening in electoral processes and the media industry in countries, so as to manipulate or at least distort public conversation regarding matters of general interest. As confusion is created among the population, people are not sure whether they can continue to trust their own institutions. A good example of this would be Russia's interference in foreign elections to weaken the health and credibility of democratic regimes. Therefore, these apparently chaotic actions are targeted to cover specific interests in Russian foreign action, through 'subversion, espionage or sabotage'⁴⁵.

Twitter takes care to prevent other States from using the social network to interfere in democratic processes, due to the importance of cyber-attacks and the necessary defence to stop them from acting in delicate scenarios. In this regard, during the United States elections of 2016, Twitter found 'accounts potentially connected to a propaganda effort by a Russian government-linked organization known as the Internet Research Agency'⁴⁶. However, the American case was not the only one, as US Senator, Angus S. King, affirmed in an investigation carried out by the Congress on the role played of Google, Twitter and Facebook in the interference in elections, that 'We know that the Russians were involved in the French election [and] we know that they were involved in the German elections'⁴⁷.

Russia's attempts to interfere in elections encompasses far more areas than social networks, as in the case of the elite Russian military unit known as Unit 29155, also investigated in Spain⁴⁸. However, the importance responds to this use of social media and it is therefore necessary to distinguish the use of bot accounts of cyber-attacks based for example on a computer virus. The use of manipulated accounts on a social network is mainly aimed towards affecting the public opinion of a country, achieved by transmitting selected information (or disinformation), whereas cyber-attacks based on another kind of computer virus usually seek to sabotage institutions or steal compromised information.

From a Russian perspective, to achieve their goals they considered it would be a good idea to make democracies appear to be less attractive. In this regard, the former anchor of the state-controlled news channel RT, Liz Wahl, who resigned because the channel

⁴⁵ TAMAMES, J. "Moscú en la red: la nueva injerencia rusa", *El Orden Mundial*, 04-10-2018, retrieved from <https://elordenmundial.com/moscu-en-la-red-la-nueva-injerencia-rusa/> (accessed 08/01/2021).

⁴⁶ TWITTER'S GLOBAL POLICY TEAM [@policy], "Update on Twitter's review of the 2016 US election" 19-01-2018, retrieved from https://blog.twitter.com/en_us/topics/company/2018/2016-election-update.html (accessed 25-06-2020).

⁴⁷ JAMIESON, A., "Russians 'Set Up Shop' in Scotland and Aim to Cause Online Chaos Senator Says", *NBC*, 02-11-2017, retrieved from <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/russians-set-shop-scotland-aim-cause-online-chaos-senator-says-n816751> (accessed 11-06-2020).

⁴⁸ EL PAÍS, "La Audiencia Nacional investiga los movimientos de espías rusos en Cataluña", LÓPEZ, O. & PÉREZ, F., 22-11-2019, retrieved from https://elpais.com/politica/2019/11/20/actualidad/1574276025_237776.html (accessed 22/05/2020).

broadcast prejudiced opinions to cause harm, assured that, ‘After a while working for RT, you learn what stories management likes and how to tackle stories in a manner that the bosses find favourable. You come to learn that these stories must conform to a basic principle: make the US and the west look bad. In doing so, you make Russia look better by comparison’.

1. Russia’s interference in Catalonia’s political crisis

On 1 October 2017, the authorities of the government of Catalonia tried to hold a referendum on self-determination of the region, which had been declared illegal by the Constitutional Court. Together with the subsequent declaration of the territory’s independence, it represented one of the most stressful times for society and Spanish democracy, as a profound disaffection was made evident among part of the Catalans, with both themselves and the rest of Spain. The situation led to an unprecedented escalation in the political crisis that the country had been suffering for years⁴⁹. However, the most notable fact of this event that even after four years would appear to be irreconcilable, where the population was encouraged by a massive campaign of fake news and disinformation in an exercise of sharp power by Russia.

According to the newspaper *El País*⁵⁰ there is evidence that the Kremlin’s interference networks interfered with the political and social process that was taking place in Catalonia to pour even more instability onto a situation that was already delicate, like the relationships between the Catalan and Spanish governments, with the purpose of weakening Spain and, subsequently, the European Union. In the days before and after the referendum, proof was published⁵¹ that the Kremlin’s disinformation machinery was focusing its efforts on inundating social networks with messages, rumours and fake news through a myriad of profiles, of which a large part were robotised, especially Twitter, which amplified them massively, inundating true information that should have been available to citizens with disinformation. As mentioned in the news, Moscow also made use of the networks belonging to the Venezuelan Chavista sphere in order to propagate a negative image of Spain during the days before and after the referendum of 1 October.

Spanish institutions, the government, political parties of the Courts, and even the media and civil society in general were rendered powerless against a new type of attack to which they were not accustomed and as a result they were unable or did not know how to respond. A study by the George Washington University⁵² affirmed that during the days before and after 1 October 2017, two contradictory narratives related to the independence

⁴⁹ EL CONFIDENCIAL, “¿Qué pasó el 1 de octubre? Así se desarrolló el referéndum por la independencia”, 01-10-2018, retrieved from https://www.elconfidencial.com/espana/cataluna/2018-10-01/1octubre-cataluna-cronologia-referendum2017_1622549/ (accessed 10/01/2020).

⁵⁰ EL PAÍS, “RT y Sputnik fueron los mayores difusores de noticias sobre Cataluña por redes”, MARS, A., 06-03-2018, retrieved from https://elpais.com/internacional/2018/03/05/estados_unidos/1520277454_983401.html (accessed 11/11/2019).

⁵¹ EL PAÍS, “La injerencia rusa en Cataluña”, 2018, retrieved from https://elpais.com/agr/la_injerencia_rusa_en_cataluna/a (accessed 18/07/2019).

⁵² *Ibid.*

issue were circulating on social media, in which 78.2% of the messages defended Catalonia's secession from the rest of Spain, portraying it as a repressive State that made use of political brutality, whereas only 19.2% defended the legitimacy of the Constitution and the government to declare the referendum illegal.

The following month, it was confirmed by the Spanish government⁵³ that the referendum had taken place, as well as the subsequent riots. The Minister of Defence, María Dolores de Cospedal, and the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Alfonso Dastis, reported that there was evidence of public and private groups, half of which had been discovered to have come from Russia, while another 30% had been located in Venezuela, which had used Twitter, Facebook and other social media to massively disseminate propaganda in favour of the separatist cause with regard to the referendum of 1 October, and try to influence the situation and create unrest in Europe. These accusations of interference were denied by both the Russian government, which accused the Western World of conducting a campaign to discredit Russia, and the independence movement leaders.

However, the Russian agents did not only use such surreptitious means to subvert public opinion, the RT and Sputnik state-owned news channels funded and directed by the Kremlin, which, despite declaring they are objective and their sole purpose is to disseminate information, have been used repeatedly throughout recent years as a form of propaganda to exalt everything related to Russia, excluding all criticism to the detriment of what we could call the western block, with Spain as the target in this case. According to a report published in the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, on 2 October the distribution of RT and Sputnik was 1.7 times higher than that of El País.

Right from the beginning, the RT and Sputnik news channels only offered a partial view of the situation. In the middle of September 2017, Russian digital activity related to the secession of Catalonia had multiplied by 2,000%, and this high priority given by RT and Sputnik to the publication of articles and features about the matter even exceeded El País, especially focusing on exclusive interviews with politicians and pro-independence experts. In fact, the editorial view was not only partial but tendentious, constantly writing about the referendum as if it were an overwhelming victory. For example, an article by RT briefly mentioned that even though in the referendum 92% of the voters supported Catalonia's independence, Madrid just called it illegal⁵⁴. However, the article failed to mention the fact that although an overwhelming majority of the voters supported independence, the poll failed to comply with minimum standards and that only 43% of the Catalan electorate had voted. The remaining 57% abstained, boycotting the referendum as it was considered illegal⁵⁵.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ RT, "1mn march for Catalonia's independence as referendum anniversary nears", 11-09-2018, retrieved from <https://www.rt.com/news/438216-catalonia-independence-rally-barcelona/> (accessed 26/10-2019).

⁵⁵ INOTAI, E., "How Assange and Snowden led the Russian forces in Catalonia", Political Capital, 28-03-2019, retrieved from https://politicalcapital.hu/russian_sharp_power_in_cee/publications.php?article_read=1 &article_id=2417 (accessed 20-02-2020).

Despite the fact that the Kremlin's political position in respect to the Catalan issue was that it was an internal matter that only involved Spain, the narrative disseminated by the state-controlled government media, Russia Today and Sputnik, was very different. 1 October was portrayed with

streets full of burning tyres, police beating up peaceful protesters, political prisoners in jail and a country on the verge of collapse. Catalonia, a nation whose fundamental right to self-determination has been denied. While the European Union stands by helplessly, watching the atrocious injustice and the attack on democracy. European Union is an impassive onlooker, ignoring the atrocious injustice implied⁵⁶.

According to the National Intelligence Centre, the Russians' interest in Catalonia would reside in filling the void left by the companies that abandoned the region due to the political instability after the referendum. Moreover, an independent Catalonia would be seen as a possible base that would enable it to penetrate other parts of Europe, where its businesses are restricted by the sanctions imposed by US and EU authorities as a result of the annexation of Crimea. Since its intrusion in 2017, typical of a hybrid war, Spain has included disinformation as a threat to the National Security Strategy⁵⁷.

V. THE DISINFORMATION CAMPAIGN CAUSED BY THE SARS-COV-2 PANDEMIC

The current circumstances caused by the Covid-19 health crisis has offered an opportunity to use sharp power tools to break into public opinion in order to increase confusion, and thus weaken people's confidence in the way their authorities and institutions are managing the pandemic.

In this regard, Russia's disinformation machinery has published a significant amount of fake news that have been used as a rallying cry by pandemic negationist groups in different countries around the world. However, in view of these accusations, Moscow alleged that the Russian media have not acted as the original source of the majority of fake news, but they have concentrated on amplifying theories from other places, such as China, Iran and the United States. Their repercussion is significant, as according to data collected by Brussels RT is 12th on the list of media with the highest amount of traffic shared on social networks, ahead of agencies as important as Reuters or Bloomberg.

The European External Action Service (EEAS), headed by the High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, has published reports since March 2020, when the first wave of the pandemic hit a large part of Europe, where it affirms that the aim of these

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ EL PAÍS, "La maquinaria rusa ganó la batalla 'online' del referéndum ilegal", ALANDETE, D., 13-11-2017, Retrieved from https://elpais.com/politica/2017/11/12/actualidad/1510500844_316723.html (accessed 20-01-2021).

disinformation campaigns would be ‘to induce distrust in national and European authorities and healthcare systems, international institutions, and scientific experts’ in the population of these countries⁵⁸.

The World Health Organisation itself referred to the ‘infodemic’ that has accompanied the pandemic since its early days, according to one of its publication⁵⁹, with which the world organisation defines an excess of both true and false information, which makes it difficult for consumers to rely on credible and true information in such a bewildering situation, due to ‘political or economic reasons’⁶⁰.

Included among the most significant examples of disinformation, used by negationist groups in protests against the measures adopted to tackle the pandemic, is the rumour that Covid is linked to the roll-out of the 5G network, that the European Union has failed to manage the crisis and is incapable of providing its Member States with urgent aid, borders have closed, yet migrants continue to move around freely (in relation to xenophobic feelings) and other fake news, thus fostering opposition to vaccination with the existence of natural remedies to cure the virus.

In an update of the report of April 2020⁶¹ the EEAS confirmed that the dissemination of disinformation by Kremlin-funded media via social networks had continued with the advance of the pandemic, mainly in order to undermine trust in the European Union and sow doubt about the origin of the virus and the health consequences of SARS-CoV-2, even ‘contradicting information from WHO’.

However, Moscow’s propagandistic exercise is not limited to specific target countries, it also focuses on its own people. In April 2020, after Russia had sent aid to Italy, the BBC published an article⁶² in which it explained how media close to the Kremlin were disseminating images and articles on Italian citizens singing the Russian national anthem, as well as replacing the EU flag by the Russian tricolour in Italian cities⁶³. Furthermore,

⁵⁸ EL CONFIDENCIAL, “Bulos, aviones y el fin de la UE: la propaganda de Putin golpea donde duele”, 03-03-2020, retrieved from https://www.elconfidencial.com/mundo/2020-04-03/rusia-union-europea-propaganda-putin_2531351/ (accessed 04-05-2020).

⁵⁹ UNITED NATIONS DEPARTMENT OF GLOBAL COMMUNICATIONS, *op. cit.*

⁶⁰ EUVSDISINFO, “EEAS special report: disinformation on the coronavirus short assessment of the information environment”, 19-03-2020, retrieved from <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/eeas-special-report-disinformation-on-the-coronavirus-short-assessment-of-the-information-environment/?highlight=coronavirus> (accessed 25/10/2020).

⁶¹ EUVSDISINFO, “EEAS special report update: short assessment of narratives and disinformation around the COVID-19/coronavirus pandemic”, 24-04-2020, retrieved from <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/eeas-special-report-update-2-22-april/?highlight=coronavirus> (accessed 25/11/2020).

⁶² BBC, “In Italy - the Russian anthem, hang "tricolor" and Pupo sings in Russian. What's wrong with that?”, Zakharov, A. & Soshnikov, A., 01-08-2018, retrieved from <https://www.bbc.com/russian/features52100274?fbclid=IwAR35ekoXPYSK5vjdqVtHOEhpKSGFFIK8MVigrS7odK0-wMTckUJZtRNS1to> (accessed 27-10-2020).

⁶³ DARIA, K., "Friends are in trouble. Italians change EU flags to Russian tricolor”, 24-03-2020, retrieved from <https://life.ru/p/1314571> (accessed 15/05/2020).

Italian nationals were also offered money⁶⁴ on condition they publicly thanked Russia, especially its president, Vladimir Putin, for the help they had received in the context of Covid. According to the transalpine newspaper, they had offered up to €200 to record themselves giving thanks in a video that would be published on social media. This material included phrases such as ‘Thank you for lending us a hand’, ‘Dear Merkel, thanks you for abandoning us’, and ‘The United States and Europe should learn’. Some of these affirmations were manipulated and exaggerated as a propagandistic exercise, as according to the independent medium, The Moscow Times, the people who appeared on Russian singing its national anthem or giving their thanks with the Pan-Slavic flag had both family and economical connections with Russia.

To assess the overall consequences of this campaign, Real Instituto Elcano⁶⁵ affirmed that the metamorphosis of this information had given rise to violent acts, such as the destruction of communication antennas in several places in the United Kingdom, Ireland, the Netherlands, Germany and Cyprus, due to the unfounded fear that the 5G network could have a negative effect on people.

VI. THE OFFENSIVE OF AFFECTED COUNTRIES IN RESPECT TO SHARP POWER

The fact that some economic means can be employed by authoritarianisms to exercise power is used by democracies as an excuse in their benefit. A noteworthy case is the offensive against the TikTok social network, an app used to share short-form videos that are usually musical, with currently around 800 million users around the world⁶⁶, 100 million of whom are in the United States. Trump’s offensive against TikTok last year was used by Chinese state-controlled media to lash out against the United States. In this regard, Global Times⁶⁷ stated in one of its articles that ‘This is indeed the hunting and looting of TikTok by the US government in conjunction with US high-tech companies’.

In June 2020, the platform was officially banned in India, along with another 50 Chinese apps, and although in the case of the United States it was never actually banned, an executive order was approved that acknowledged that the platform posed a threat. It was

⁶⁴ TONACCI, F., ““200 euro se ringrazi la Russia per gli aiuti”: quello strano arruolamento su WhatsApp”, *La Repubblica*, 12-04-2020, retrieved from https://www.repubblica.it/esteri/2020/04/12/news/russia_propaganda_a_pagamento-253794264/?refresh_ce (accessed 17/05/2020).

⁶⁵ ORTEGA, A., “Bots rusos: mucha injerencia, ¿poca influencia?”, Real Instituto Elcano, 28-04-2020, retrieved from https://blog.realinstitutoelcano.org/bots-rusos-mucha-injerencia-poca-influencia/?utm_source=newsletter235&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=may2020&_cldee=c2FyYS5hbGJpbnlhbmFAZ21haWwY29t&recipientid=contact-f9bf2fe2c848ea11a812000d3a44afcc-7cfc151eaa294c63857710eff200afb6&esid=966db2d5-f399-ea11-a812-000d3a44afcc (accessed 25-10-2020).

⁶⁶ DATAREPORTAL, “Global social media overview”, 2020, retrieved from <https://datareportal.com/social-media-users?rq=tiktok> (accessed 07/07/2020).

⁶⁷ GLOBAL TIMES, “TikTok ban demonstrates barbaric act of rogue US”, 2020, retrieved from <https://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1196404.shtml> (accessed 15/10/2020).

announced that within 45 days after the approval, it would prohibit “any transaction by any person, or with respect to any property, subject to the jurisdiction of the United States, with ByteDance (the company that owns the application) [...]”⁶⁸. The reasons given, as in the case of India, were the threat to its national security, and the order also claimed political censorship in the app, in line with the Chinese Communist Party's agenda, as well as possibly using it for disinformation campaigns, as

TikTok automatically collects a great deal of information about its users, including the internet and other online activity, such as location data and search and browsing history. The data collection threatens to enable the Chinese Communist Party to access Americans' personal and proprietary information, potentially enabling China to track the locations of Federal employees and contractors, build dossiers of personal information for blackmail, and conduct corporate espionage⁶⁹.

In spite of this, there is no evidence or signs of this being the case, and the company itself gave a completely different point of view,

stating that it was shocked by the recent executive order, which had been issued without due process. ‘For nearly a year, we have sought to engage with the US government in good faith to provide a constructive solution to the concerns that have been expressed. What we encountered instead was that the Administration paid no attention to facts, dictated terms of an agreement without going through standard legal processes, and tried to insert itself into negotiations between private businesses’⁷⁰.

After Microsoft had attempted to buy ByteDance and Trump had approved the purchase, setting 15 September as the deadline, it was finally Oracle, in September 2020, which became the official supplier of the company in American territory. The Economist⁷¹ affirmed in that respect that, ‘Touted as vital to protect Americans’ data, the crackdown is in fact a depressing example of jingoistic opportunism, more likely to chill investment in America and stoke Chinese nationalism,’ going on to add that, ‘Mr Trump is watching over TikTok's talks with Microsoft as if he were a feudal lord’.

To deal with the conflict with China and Russia, democracies could also be seeking hard power solutions generally in the same field, considering all their companies to be a hard power threat, although these cases are unlikely, mainly due to the need to maintain relationships with these countries as, for example, China is the second-largest economy

⁶⁸ WHITE HOUSE, Executive Order on Addressing the Threat Posed by TikTok, 06-08-2020, retrieved from <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/executive-order-addressing-threat-posed-tiktok/> (accessed 02/09/2020).

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰ NEWSROOM, Statement on the Administration's Executive Order, 07-08-2020, retrieved from <https://newsroom.tiktok.com/en-us/tiktok-responds> (accessed 15/09/2020).

⁷¹ THE ECONOMIST, “Forced sales are the wrong way to deal with Chinese tech”, 05-08-2020, retrieved from <https://www.economist.com/leaders/2020/08/05/forced-sales-are-the-wrong-way-to-deal-with-chinese-tech> (accessed 17/09/2020).

in terms of GDP⁷². The American approach to the Confucius Institute network, referred to as a ‘foreign mission’, or the theoretical proposals such as the Internet Freedom League, which would isolate democracies’ cyberspace, would be within this possibility.

This proposal to create a unified cyberspace, commented by Richard A. Clarke y Rob Knake⁷³ in an article for Foreign Affairs, consists in developing a proprietary internet under the control of democracies, blocking the entry of authoritarianisms like Russia and China, restricting their free access. The model they propose is based on the European Schengen Area, “An Internet Freedom League modelled on the Schengen area is the only way to secure internet freedom from the threats posed by authoritarian states and other bad actors”⁷⁴.

The worsening of the image of authoritarianism would act as a real consequence in which its soft power could be questioned. Due to the Covid-19 crisis, the rejection towards China is at a critical moment. In January 2020, a Danish newspaper used a cartoon in which the stars of the Chinese flag had been replaced by pictures of SARS-COV-2⁷⁵, leading the Chinese embassy to demand a formal apology from the newspaper, or the case of Donald Trump, who referred to Covid as the ‘Chinese virus’⁷⁶. The fact that China uses sharp power and this has hard power consequences means that once its use has been discovered, the country’s image worsens. In an article about sharp power, published by The Economist⁷⁷, it stated that, “[...] there is indeed a danger of anti-Chinese hysteria”, as because it is not possible to distinguish between a threat of power and a means of soft power or one without the intention of power, implies a risk that everything coming from these countries could be seen as a threat, thus increasing the risk of ‘hysteria’ related to that country.

⁷² THE WORLD BANK, GDP (Current US\$), 2019, retrieved from https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.CD?most_recent_value_desc=true (accessed 25/06/2020).

⁷³ CLARKE, R. & KNAKE, R., “The Internet Freedom League. How to Push Back Against the Authoritarian Assault on the Web”, September-October 2019, retrieved from <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2019-08-12/internet-freedom-league#:~:text=An%20Internet%20Freedom%20League%20modeled,than%20today%27s%20more%20free> (accessed 20/01/2019).

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

⁷⁵ CACHERO, P., “China demands an apology from a newspaper for a satirical cartoon of a Chinese flag with coronavirus particles”, 28-01-2020, retrieved from <https://www.businessinsider.com/china-outraged-jyllands-posten-satirical-cartoon-chinese-flag-coronavirus-particles-2020-1?IR=T> (accessed 14-02-2020).

⁷⁶ EFE, “Donald Trump insiste en hablar de ‘virus chino’: ‘Viene de China, no es racista’”. Cadena Ser, 20-03-2020, retrieved from https://cadenaser.com/ser/2020/03/20/internacional/1584699227_899163.html (accessed 22/03/2020).

⁷⁷ THE ECONOMIST, “How China’s ‘sharp power’ is muting criticism abroad”, 14-12-2017, retrieved from <https://www.economist.com/briefing/2017/12/14/how-chinas-sharp-power-is-muting-criticism-abroad> (accessed 17/12/2019).

VII. THE THORNS OF SHARP POWER FOR WESTERN DEMOCRACIES

The excessive interpretation of everything coming from China or Russia as a threat of hard power, implies the loss of the soft power of democracies within authoritarianism. On the one hand, if attacks on media and entities of authoritarian countries are not sufficiently justified, it will reduce democracies' credibility. However, on the other hand, if democracies lose soft power, it will lead them to seek isolation in certain areas, thus constituting the most drastic approach and union possible against the threat of sharp power.

What would be the consequences of the proposed Internet Freedom League for democracies' soft power? The Chinese 'Great Firewall' regulates internet access domestically and its capacity to censor and control online activities is indisputable. Nevertheless, it is difficult to think that China could control or prevent the entire flow of information, with roughly 854 million users and traffic of 55 million terabytes between January and June 2019 just with mobile phones⁷⁸.

The use of VPN (Virtual Private Network) is more common in China than one would think, and this enables users to access any online content, including the possibility to use social networks and access officially banned platforms. According to GlobalWebIndex in 2014, it was used by about 90 million people in China⁷⁹, and in 2018, around 54% of VPN users did it in order to access better entertainment content⁸⁰.

Despite the Chinese government's attempts to block its use, it has not yet managed to completely block it. Margaret E. Robert (2018) classifies China's internet censorship as 'porous', in which the Chinese Communist Party uses distraction and diversion, combining strategies of fear, friction, and flooding⁸¹. The total impossibility to prevent foreign information from entering China via the internet is not real, as it is one democracies' greatest soft power 'weapons'. If democracies were isolated from authoritarianisms, it would leave the former without this soft power 'weapon' and the people in these countries would find it even more difficult to defend themselves against the use and control of the internet by their authoritarian governments. In 2017, after collecting 14 million tweets related to Russian policy from February 2014 to December 2015 (a time of great tension due to the Crimean conflict), the Computational Propaganda Research Project (belonging to the Oxford Internet Institute) observed that around 45%

⁷⁸ CINNIC, Statistical Report on Internet Development in China, 2019, pp. 6-13, retrieved from <https://cnnic.com.cn/IDR/ReportDownloads/201911/P020191112539794960687.pdf>

⁷⁹ MANDER, J., "90 million VPN users in China have accessed restricted social networks", 24-11-2014, retrieved from <https://blog.globalwebindex.com/chart-of-the-day/90-million-vpn-users-in-china-have-accessed-restricted-social-networks/> (accessed 10/04/2020).

⁸⁰ GLOBALWEBINDEX, "VPN users around the world", 2019, retrieved from <https://www.globalwebindex.com/reports/vpn-usage-around-the-world> (accessed 22/10/2020).

⁸¹ ROBERT, M., *Censored: Distraction and Diversion Inside China's Great Firewall*, Princeton University Press, 2018.

of them had been produced by bots⁸².

A consequence of approaching and confronting with the same weapons would imply a weakening of the democracies' democratic and liberal values. In a situation where it is not possible to distinguish whether or not some economic means can be used to exercise power, it is understandable that liberal democracies take measures in the interest of safety, even when they do not fit in with their principles. The approach of European countries to sharp power has been manifested in the veto to purchase companies, in the development of the EU – China Comprehensive Agreement on Investment (CAI), with investments, subsidies and state-owned companies representing one of the most discussed points⁸³. It is also worth noting the approval in 2019 of Regulation (EU) 2019/452 of the European Parliament and of the Council, establishing a framework for screening foreign direct investments into the Union⁸⁴ which, in article 4, sets forth the 'factors that may be taken into consideration by Member States or the Commission' and, in section 2, paragraph a), it stipulates as one of these factors 'whether the foreign investor is directly or indirectly controlled by the government, including state bodies or armed forces, of a third country, including through ownership structure or significant funding'.

Although these measures have been taken in an attempt to maintain European principles, they still mark a contrast with them, as in the same Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union it clearly mentions the open investment environment; specifically, article 206 especially clashes with the actions taken to ensure that

through the establishment of a customs union in accordance with articles 28 to 32, the Union, in common interest, would contribute towards the harmonious development of world trade, the progressive abolition of restrictions on international exchange and direct foreign investment, as well as the reduction of customs duties and charges with an equivalent effect⁸⁵.

The intervention of democratic governments in economic assets and other means used to face those used by China and Russia is clearly seen in Germany-based Siemens' proposal to acquire the railway sector company Alstom (headquartered in France). In 2017, both companies agreed to concentrate and combine their assets in the rail sector with the aim of creating a large European firm with the merger of the two largest rolling stock and rail

⁸² SANOVICH, S. Computational Propaganda in Russia: The Origins of Digital Misinformation, University of Oxford. 2017, p. 14, retrieved from <http://blogs.oxi.ox.ac.uk/politicalbots/wp-content/uploads/sites/89/2017/06/Comprop-Russia.pdf>

⁸³ EUROPEAN COMMISSION, EU-China Comprehensive Agreement on Investment, 13-02-2020, Retrieved from <https://trade.ec.europa.eu/doclib/press/index.cfm?id=2115#:~:text=With%20the%20EU%2DChina%20Comprehensive,basis%20with%20Chinese%20companies%20and> (accessed 24/07/2020).

⁸⁴ EUROPEAN UNION, Regulation (EU) 2019/452 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 19 March 2019 establishing a framework for the screening of foreign direct investments into the Union, retrieved from <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/ES/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32019R0452&from=EN> (accessed 14/06/2020).

⁸⁵ EUROPEAN UNION, Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, retrieved from <https://eurlex.europa.eu/legalcontent/ES/ALL/?uri=celex%3A12012E%2FTXT> (accessed 15/06/2020).

signalling suppliers in the European Economic Area⁸⁶. So as to obtain authorisation, it claimed that some foreign companies were exercising competitive pressure, including the CRRC Corporation, a Chinese state-owned company and the largest rolling stock manufacturer in the world. In this case, French President Emmanuel Macron and German Chancellor Angela Merkel defended the idea of creating 'European champions' that could compete in a globalised world, which was translated into geopolitical reasons. In this regard, following the European Commission's decision to not allow the merger, Macron reproached that, 'And instead of regretting the fact that today large digital champions are American and tomorrow they'll be Chinese, let's put ourselves in a position to create European champions. In this global shake-up let's invent fair security and effective regulations'⁸⁷ while, at the same time, Merkel criticised this decision in which 'There are countries that seek to provide their companies with advantages and they are not concerned about having an equal environment for everyone'⁸⁸. Like the French and German Ministers of Finance, Bruno Le Maire and Peter Altmaier⁸⁹ who, in a joint publication in *Le Monde*, clarified that

in 2015, China had dedicated an integral part of its industrial strategy, *Made in China 2025*, to the rail sector. Europeans must learn from this, in the matters that concern them. To be able to act in the same conditions as our competitors around the world, the creation of a sufficiently strong French-German player at an industrial level would have been an important asset against international groups already far bigger and powerful than ours. This was precisely the *raison d'être* and the justification of the merger proposal, which has now been refused by the Commission.

⁸⁶ EUROPEAN COMMISSION, Mergers: Commission opens in-depth investigation into Siemens proposed acquisition of Alstom, 13-07-2018, retrieved from https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_18_4527 (accessed 20-01-2020).

⁸⁷ ÉLYSÉE, "Initiative pour l'Europe - Discours d'Emmanuel Macron pour une Europe souveraine, unie, démocratique" 26-09-2017, retrieved from <https://www.elysee.fr/emmanuel-macron/2017/09/26/initiative-pour-l-europe-discours-d-emmanuel-macron-pour-une-europe-souveraine-unie-democratique> (accessed 11/12/2019).

⁸⁸ EFE, "Merkel critica a la CE por bloquear la fusión de Alstom y Siemens", *Expansión*, 31-03-2019, retrieved from <https://www.expansion.com/empresas/transporte/2019/03/31/5ca0fc4f268e3e8a618b4585.html> (accessed 25/11/2019).

⁸⁹ ÉLYSÉE, "France et Allemagne unies pour une relance européenne face à la crise" [Video file], 18-05-2020, retrieved from <https://www.elysee.fr/emmanuel-macron/2020/05/18/initiative-franco-allemande-pour-la-relance-europeenne-face-a-la-crise-du-coronavirus> (accessed 17/07/2020).

VIII. CONCLUSIONS

The current approach to China and Russia's sharp power provides a series of conclusions to be studied. The fact that democracies are unable to recognise or dogmatically classify Chinese or Russian tools that have a political intention, and differentiate them from those that don't, lies at the heart of these countries' approach-related problems.

Sharp power, as a way to exercise power, implies an unmistakable threat towards democratic States today. Its application is encouraged due to the particular features that characterise interactions between States within the context of the era of globalisation, and it is accepted that it is indispensable to acquire a notion of the dangerous situation our society is facing, especially the academic and political class, in order to be able to establish strategies and policies aimed towards directly confronting and counteracting the harmful effects derived from the application of sharp power.

As regards the focus that China and Russia place on this type of activity, although there are differences in respect to the form and tone, both derive from an ideological model in which state power takes precedence over individual freedom, and it is fundamentally hostile towards freedom of expression, open debate and independent thinking. The uncertainty of knowing that a threat of hard power could be used by democratic countries to obtain a benefit transfigures the possibility that less and less justification will be required for taking, alleging security reasons over the challenges implied by certain companies or assets.

Democracies' complacency as regards the development of sharp power has been informed by their trust in the soft power paradigm. Nevertheless, the conceptual vocabulary used since the end of the Cold War does not appear to adapt to the contemporary situation. Authors warn that until democratic States understand the dimension of the influence of authoritarianisms in terms of ideas, they will be incapable of responding to the threat. Those who interpret these efforts as a use of soft power dynamics by Beijing and Moscow are ignoring the danger and creating a false feeling of security.

The serious challenge represented by sharp power requires a multidimensional response, which includes exposing the initiatives for Russian and Chinese influence, which mostly depend on camouflage, distinguishing projects directed by the State as a job of trade means, or using local stakeholders as a foreign propaganda channel and exterior manipulation tools. On the one hand, democracies will also have to become immune to authoritarian influence that corrodes democratic institutions and, on the other, they will need to take a more assertive stance in favour of their own democratic principles at international level.

Using tools (mainly economic) to exercise power does not only reside in the size of a country's economy. The capacity of governments to use the tools is also important in a country's economy, and depends on each State. The growth of China, a country that due to its political and economic model has greater capacity for using these channels, places it in an advantageous position over these countries and blocks of democratic countries

based on market economy and liberal principles, such as the United States and the European Union. In light of this situation, democracies are using methods for addressing their relationships with China, actions that have been interpreted and responded to as a hard power threat. Although it cannot be affirmed that the measures exclusively respond to this uncertainty, it is clear that it is difficult to distinguish between Chinese economic tools that have no intention of power, and those that do, a situation that harbours the essence of the current problem of trade relationships between western democracies and China.

Based on the premise that these cases of sharp power are a soft power threat, which could also generate responses of hard power by democracies, in both the political and theoretical field. It is understood that the current approach towards these countries could imply serious consequences, not only for the future of authoritarianism, but also for democratic countries.