Democracy Paradox Podcast
Christopher Walker revisits sharp power (4/15/26)
Transcript

Introduction

Today's guest is Christopher Walker. He is the Vice President for the Center for European Policy Analysis. Before that he was the Vice President of Studies and Analysis at the National Endowment for Democracy. He is the author of many papers and reports on the subject of sharp power and the influence of authoritarian regimes on democratic regimes.

Chris developed the idea of sharp power as a way of describing efforts to influence international political behavior that didn't involve hard military power or soft cultural power. It was often used to describe efforts used by authoritarian powers like Russia and China to manipulate politics within democracies.

Sharp power was a popular term used widely close to ten years ago but has largely fallen out of favor in recent years. This is a bit surprising because sharp power is more common today than it was back then.

I reached out to Chris to reintroduce the concept and talk about how it has changed in the years since he introduced the concept. I also press him on whether democracies like the United States also utilize tools of sharp power especially as they shift towards a more aggressive foreign policy.

I encourage you to think more about this concept. Consider whether this is a useful concept. If it is useful, are we using it correctly. Is this something that really just explains the behavior of authoritarian towards democracies or can democracies adopt those same tools? And if so should they?

These are all important questions. Please share your thoughts. If you listen to Spotify, you can leave your thoughts as a comment on the episode. You can also send me your thoughts as an email to jkempf@democracyparadox.com. There is also a link to the complete transcript in the show notes.

The Democracy Paradox is made in partnership with the Kellogg Institute of the Keough School of Global Affairs at the University of Notre Dame. Make sure to mark your calendar for the upcoming Global Democracy Conference on May 19th and 20th. This year's conference will take place at the University of Notre Dame. Check the link in the show notes to register today. But for now… here is my conversation with Christopher Walker…

Podcast Interview

Justin Kempf: Christopher Walker, welcome to the *Democracy Paradox*.

Christopher Walker: Thanks so much, Justin. It's great to be here with you.

Justin Kempf: So, Chris, you are widely associated with the concept called Sharp Power. I remember when it first came out and it wasn't just something talked about within the democracy scholarship community. It was something that I would read about in the pages of *The Economist*. It was something that people were using to discuss this phenomenon that was happening in real time. I'd like to better understand where this idea came from. It's widely known that Joseph Nye developed the idea of soft power, but I don't know the origin story behind the idea of sharp power. So why don't we start there? Was this your idea or did it develop through an organic process with others?

Christopher Walker: I appreciate the question. Maybe I'd start by saying where soft power evolved from, because I think that's central to understanding how my colleagues and I finally landed on this idea of sharp power. In a sense, at the end of the Cold War, Joseph Nye made the argument that the US, which was in a predominant position at the time, would benefit from not simply relying on hard power, which is to say power exerted through a military threat or its use. He contended that the US would benefit as it did during the Cold War, from using a wide range of sources of influence, which included non-governmental sources, culture, and the like.

In the meantime, the assumption going back to the 90s was that the trajectory of political development globally would favor democracy and there was a lot to support that idea throughout the 1990s, even into the early 2000s. But as we know from analysis and indices, including Freedom House, which recently released its most recent findings saying that there's been a 20-year decline overall in political rights and civil liberties, things have not turned out quite the way people imagined and assumed they would from the vantage point of the early 1990s. Moreover, the countries that today are deeply engaged in the non-military space like China, like Russia and others have not reformed. And if anything, they're more repressive than they were.

So, in a sense, many of the assumptions that were held at the time about the trajectory of global politics, the way influence would be exerted, I would contend have been challenged. One part of this challenge was this assumption that if powers like China and Russia, which coming out of the 90s and then into the 2000s started to find their footing and then became deeply engaged internationally, not only militarily. So, in China's case, they have undertaken in recent years one of the greatest peace time military buildups in history. Russia has done likewise, including through the horrific attack it's waging in Ukraine. But I would say an important part of that story coming out of the 1990s was the buildup of influence instruments in the non-military domain.

And so, we're talking about information, education, culture, and what largely happened, I would argue, is analysts in the democracies simply defaulted to the soft power framing of the activities of these large authoritarian powers and used that label as a catchall for everything they were doing. What my colleagues and I felt as we started to look at this and we had very extensive research projects looking into the ways in which influence that was exerted from China and Russia was expressing itself and how it was exerted.

What we found as we got into this was the effects of this influence often was to monopolize ideas, suppress alternative narratives, and exploit partner institutions, which was at odds with the Joseph Nye conception of attraction, persuasion, volunteerism. These were all terms associated with soft power and so we thought it was important to, at a minimum, raise some questions about this default posture that had happened in large measure to label all of the activities that were being exerted by these authoritarian powers in open societies as soft power.

Justin Kempf: So, a lot of the initial work came out almost 10 years ago. The influential report that you wrote with Jessica Ludwig, "Sharp Power Rising: Authoritarian Influence" came out in 2017. A lot has changed since then, both internationally in terms of foreign affairs and international relationships. The war in Ukraine has been going on for years now, but that started in 2022, so that was five years after you wrote this landmark report. How has sharp power changed since it was first introduced almost 10 years ago both as an actual phenomenon, but also just in terms of how you understand it?

Christopher Walker: So, my strong sense is that because these large authoritarian powers have made sustained investments. In instruments that allow them to exert non-military influence. If anything, this influence is even stronger today. These sustained concerted investments at a time when the world more generally has become less open and less free according to the major indices, including the Economist Intelligence Unit and Freedom House and the like suggest a much tougher environment and I would argue that. Free societies have a far steeper curve right now in the sense that sharp power seeks to exploit the openness of free societies because their institutions are open as they should be, and the adversaries of freedom, in my view, are seeking to hobble their peer competitors, first and foremost, the United States, but it includes other democracies around the world.

Australia was arguably at the front end of this challenge going back more than a decade ago and it informed a good deal of the thinking and research that my colleagues and I did at the time. Basically, what was discovered in Australia after the surfacing of an extraordinary amount of investment from China or from China's surrogates was that those investments were actively seeking to determine what was said and not said about China in public discussions, for example. That, in my view, is not soft power. Yet in that context of discussing China's engagement in the wider world and how it was more invested in education through the Confucius Institutes and otherwise supporting educational initiatives and the knowledge sector somehow there was a disconnect. There was something deeply incongruent when you looked at what was actually the effect of this engagement and the way it was being characterized.

The effect was to censor, to monopolize, to sideline debate, but the description of what was going on was a Chinese exertion of soft power. So here we're talking about more than a dozen years ago. So as far as I can see, China has not stopped its investments, Russia has not stopped its investments, the Gulf states have not stopped their investments in these domains. Meanwhile, the democracies, in my view, have not been investing in a meaningful way to compete. In a sense, competition is even more intense today in this environment where freedom is on its back foot where the pressure on independent institutions globally is more acute than it was a decade ago.

So if anything the environment for the exertion of sharp power is probably more hospitable, making the need for the response, both in terms of how democracies can defend themselves, but also, perhaps we can talk a little bit, about what it would also mean to reclaim the initiative because this is a big part of the story in my view as well.

Justin Kempf: Oh, it definitely is. But why don't we paint the picture more in terms of how sharp power is actually exercised and I think the Confucius Institutes are a really good case study to better understand this. I came across a Confucius Institute near my home in Indianapolis years ago. It was shut down around the time that I discovered it, so I didn't see it or talk to anybody there, but I saw some literature for it. It was some advertising for day camps during the summer for your kids so that they could learn the Chinese language. And to be honest with you, it was very appealing.

If I didn't know what the Confucius Institutes were doing at the time, I might have even signed my kids up for this summer camp because it was targeting the exact kind of stuff that a lot of people want to do, which is not only to have a place to have your kids go to that they can learn during the summer, but they were going to be learning a foreign language that is likely to be one that's going to be very important to learn in the future. So, these are institutes that on the surface provide valuable services to people in western societies. Where does it go wrong?

Christopher Walker: Thanks for the question. The Confucius Institutes are one part of the larger puzzle of influence instruments that are out there. In a sense it's a small piece of the larger puzzle, certainly for the Chinese party state. I think it's a good example of the larger definition of how we think about the word sharp. So, sharp power connotes something that can cut through and pierce independent institutions. But sharp can also mean something that looks sharp or is clever and astute. I'd contend that the definition embodies that in a way. The Confucius Institutes are a good example of it for the reasons you cite. No one is going to argue with the ostensible benefits of learning the Chinese language or learning about Chinese culture.

No one is going to argue against availing opportunities that might not otherwise be there for young people or others to have a better sense of these things. To your question, the problem arises with the Confucius Institutes in that there really is a monopolization of the ideas and the content that is available because the Chinese authorities and the propaganda apparatus in the end controls these entities and determines that. Moreover, what we've seen over time is that there is an insistence by the Chinese side in the arrangements with administrators at educational institutions wherever it is. It's not just in the United States. As some of the democracies have become more attuned and focused on the problems that arise from these relationships, they've actually become better at rightsizing the relationships or cutting them where necessary.

But what's happened over time, as I understand it, is that many of these institutes have gravitated from northern to southern Europe where they've grown more extensively in Latin America or in the Balkans. There's been growth in other parts of the transatlantic space. There's been a shrinkage in terms of these institutions. But there would be an insistence from the Chinese representatives that Chinese regulations and law would be followed even for institutions that were physically located in open societies in democracies. Moreover, unlike other institutions with a similar structure, for example, the Alliance Française or the Goethe

Institute, would almost invariably be situated outside of the school with which they had a relationship, outside that school's administrative structure.

Whereas there would be an insistence by the Chinese side that Confucius Institutes would be embedded within the institutions and therefore giving them leverage. So all of these things contributed to an uncomfortable situation where either explicit or implicit pressure could be exerted to not take up certain issues or to otherwise sideline items on agendas in ways that were just inconsistent, both with freedom of expression generally, but academic integrity more fundamentally.

One of these examples that arose early on and was put into the public domain is known as the Braga incident, which took place at a university in Portugal in which representatives of the Confucius Institute there actually tore pages out of a program that was being organized by the European Association for Chinese Studies and those pages related to Taiwan. That was a very controversial incident, but by no means the only one. I think with time, which has been very important, there's really been terrific research and investigative reporting that's helped to put into context the effects of this kind of engagement again, is not consistent with open, meaningful free expression, but is more consistent with limiting viewpoints, censorship and monopolizing ideas.

Justin Kempf: So you mentioned earlier that authoritarian governments - China, Russia, Gulf States, possibly others - utilize sharp power in a way that takes advantage of liberal democracies' inherent openness. Does that mean that open societies are just going to be vulnerable to sharp power? Is it possible to defend against sharp power without abandoning those values that are associated with liberalism, such as freedom of speech or openness? Do we have to sensor voices in order to defend against sharp power or take other steps that might violate other values that we believe?

Christopher Walker: So you put your finger on the central dilemma that has arisen with this really tough mix of factors over the last quarter century, which is in effect this sense that globalization would work best for open societies and globalization in some ways has been extremely productive, but not for everybody. One of the misguided assumptions I would say has been that the authoritarian regimes with which we've engaged over this time would reform and themselves become more small 'l' liberal and open both in economic and political and media terms. That absolutely is not the case, certainly for China, certainly for Russia and a host of other such countries.

For those countries that have the capability to engage beyond their borders in a serious way and have the resources and the intention to do so, which is true for the Gulf States and for China and Russia, it's a real question now because China, for example, is so deeply integrated in so many countries in economic and other terms, and I think we were caught on our heels and maybe sleepwalking from the perspective of the earliest stages of this. The good news is that in many settings there has been progress to your point where the objective is not to make ourselves like the authoritarian powers, it's to safeguard the benefits of freedom, which are so evident for our own prosperity and security and not to compromise those. It makes us more competitive to be free and open.

But we also must be mindful that in this environment where incredibly intentional and purposeful regimes… It's no mystery what the leadership in Russia and China are now aiming for. They basically say it and they say it also through their instruments of media. Just to use this example, they assail democracies. They rarely tout their own achievements. They undermine the democratic idea to the extent they're able, so it's pretty clear what their ambition is, so efforts that have been made over time to make more transparent the engagements with authoritarian powers or their surrogates to understand where information is coming from so that it's not absorbed without any lack of understanding of that and otherwise creating, for example, screening of investments that could be leveraged for corrosive purposes in open societies.

There's been headway made across a wide range of countries and regions on that front. But I would say at this stage, there needs to be extraordinary vigilance because China will not relent and they continue to engage. The ambition to use the logic and the standards of their own governance models when they are engaging beyond their borders will remain. That's one of the central tenants of what we're facing is that when the Chinese authorities and their surrogates engage in an open society, it's not as though they check their preferences for censorship and dominating discussions at the door or at their borders. They bring them with them and then to the extent they're not checked or that's not resisted, they push it. We've seen this in any number of instances over the years.

Justin Kempf: So, something that I worry about within these conversations is that if we're lazy about the way we think and talk about these concepts, we can fall into a trap where everything a democracy does gets described as soft power and everything an authoritarian regime does is described as sharp power. You mentioned just a second ago that we don't want to fall into the trap of using the strategies of Russia and China in terms of sharp power. That shouldn't be the direction that we go. But it does make me wonder, do democracies use those tools already? Is sharp power a tool that's limited to authoritarian governments or do we see democracies already adopting it as well?

Christopher Walker: I think the best way to consider this is the effects of the engagement and the way that the power is exercised. I would argue that for democracies, including but not limited to the United States, there's enormous benefit in using non-military instruments to advance freedom and openness and to compete. I don't believe that's what authoritarian powers do irrespective of what country we're talking about. Typically, when you look at the engagement in public programs or in education initiatives there is a tendency to want to manipulate, control, censor. My sense is for long-term prosperity and the benefits of living in openness and freedom. It's better to pursue policies and power that would enable that more broadly. I think there could be a temptation in some quarters to try to sideline voices or these things potentially from democracies.

I find that deeply inadvisable, but I should say that, as I described earlier, the genesis of this idea was essentially looking at the effects of engagement and the effects of the exertion of certain forms of influence that were being characterized as soft power but actually were not doing such. One final thought on this - I think it's also useful just to keep in mind - often shorthand is used for these terms and for the way they're used, but in a sense, the instruments that are used.

So, for example, an international broadcaster, in my view, could be used as an instrument that ultimately exerts soft power because it's trying to really meaningfully enable pluralistic debate and alternative viewpoints and diverse viewpoints or it could be used systematically to sideline certain viewpoints or amplify a viewpoint that's preferred by a single political power, which is in effect what China does. I think there is this more nuanced question of the effects of the influence that's exerted and the instruments, because sometimes you'll hear people say Radio Free Europe or Radio Free Asia in the US context is soft power.

I would argue that the work they do as surrogate broadcasters is incredibly valuable and is exerting soft power because it's engendering a wider range of voices and offering pluralism in settings where that is not permitted. That's precisely the mission of those entities. Whereas CGTN, which is the China Global Television Network and the China Radio International and such has very bounded editorial space that is in the end controlled by a political power that has no meaningful checks on it or accountability or competition. So that's a different governance arrangement for those kinds of instruments, which in my view tends to exert different forms of influence.

Justin Kempf: My understanding of Radio Free Europe and other efforts that the United States government has done is that we can safely describe it as soft power because we gave them editorial control and their job was to give a truly neutral version of the news. It wasn't to describe the news from an American perspective. We weren't giving them a list of things that they needed to report in the way that propaganda is usually done during a military campaign. We were empowering this group to act independently and to provide news in a way that's neutral, in a way that people in those places wouldn't necessarily receive. However, during periods of war, such as World War II, Allied Powers were very engaged in propaganda.

I spoke to Peter Pomerantsev a few years back. He had this fascinating book on a character named Sefton Delmer, who was one of the architects of propaganda within the British Army and was actively producing radio broadcasts that were meant to manipulate the Germans. So, the question that I've got and that I really had for Peter too at the time is should we be rethinking our approach if China and Russia are so aggressive in terms of their efforts to control narratives? Should America and other governments be more aggressive or should we hold firm in terms of our existing values and what we've always believed?

Christopher Walker: I think both. I would answer it this way. I think we need to assiduously retain and safeguard the values that distinguish us. But also take a much more forward-leaning posture and retake the initiative on these things. You touched on the trajectory of the media environment. I think the other thing that we lose sight of, which has been a very long-term trend, very troubling trend, is that independent media broadly understood in a democracy, certainly the transatlantic democracies, but I think this is also true in East Asia and Australia and New Zealand has really been degraded over time because the media models have been under such pressure.

That's happened at exactly the same time. It's almost like ships crossing in the night that China and Russia have both actively limited journalists from democracies to cover events in their countries, been more repressive, and become more adept at their own ability to use information in a modern environment. So we find ourselves, I would say, in a very unfriendly set of circumstances right now where both from the private, independent media point of view, news outlets that might've had multiple correspondence sprinkled across Eurasia or in Asia

25 years ago that has been dramatically scaled back either because of budget cuts or because the governments, the authoritarian governments, in places like Beijing and Moscow have actively denied visas to journalists or otherwise made it impossible to do meaningful reporting.

This has all happened over this period where public investments in these things to afford independent diverse information has also shrunk. So, there is no simple answer to this, Justin. I think it requires some serious thought even in the last days. In fact, there have been reports of how the US administration is struggling with the information capabilities of our peer adversaries. This is a huge deal in Europe as well, in the European Union, not just in the space geographically closest to Russia, for example, but across the continent. In a way what you can take from this, and I'm thoroughly convinced of it is that the leadership in Russia and China…

In Russia's case, Vladimir Putin is now in his second quarter century in charge in Russia. You have to take stock of that and Xi Jinping is now in year 14 with no indication that either one of these leaders are going anywhere and they've really put a premium on this outward facing influence and communication and information. They've invested in it accordingly, because they take it seriously. I think free societies have to take this much more seriously because in key respects the countries, the regimes that are competing directly with us seek to gain strategic advantage where they look to keep us on our heels, both in our own countries, but increasingly over time. In other key parts of the world where they've been investing at scale and we have been retrenching. It's one of the central weak spots that we've enabled over the last generation.

Justin Kempf: So particularly within the past year, trade policy has obviously changed where we've adopted a much more aggressive stance towards countries that are traditionally our allies. In response, countries like Canada have begun changing their foreign policy approaches to reach out to countries like China in ways that they weren't doing even just a few years ago. We've got India that feels that they're a bit in a bind and they're reaching out to China to try to create a bridge because they've always had conflicts with them and now they're trying to figure out how do they deal the world where the United States is not quite as reliable or not quite the trade partner that they expected.

The question I've got for you is, has America's more aggressive foreign policy led to countries becoming more susceptible to sharp power from Russia, but particularly from China, as they try to reach out and find other partners for whether it's investments or whether it's trade or anything else?

Christopher Walker: This is a phenomenal question with several dimensions to it. I think fundamentally what China and Russia seek to do, it's actually their bread and butter, is divide and conquer. It's true domestically with the regimes themselves. It's one of the methods by which the incumbent powers there stay in power. But of course, they use this beyond their borders as well. China seeks to divide the United States from Europe. China seeks to divide different regions of Europe from each other. This was actually central to the so-called 17 plus one, which is now I think 14 plus one. So, if you think about it, the fundamental response from free societies should be unity to the extent possible.

It's not always so easy, but this would be fundamental to the response to China, not simply at a higher strategic level, but it's also central to strengthening responses and strengthening the sinews that help address the encroachments that invariably come from China in the form of sharp power. So there have been efforts made in certain respects through things like the G-7 rapid response mechanism, which conceptually was looking to share information to surface activities and encroachments among a set of democracies coming from the outside, from not any specific country, but from some of the countries we've been discussing. Information sharing and learning how to address encroachments into the media space or financial gambits that might be coming into one country that would be seen soon in another.

That is one of the most important ways over time to be better prepared to meaningfully address and sustain a response to these persistent intrusions that are pursued by the likes of China and Russia and their surrogates. So to the extent that policies are taken to drive natural allies away or even potentially get them to consider deeper engagement with China that's just deeply inadvisable and isn't in the end, in the interests of US security, I would argue. Hopefully we can right size some of these very tough discussions and approaches that are taken now to look at what I would argue is the fundamental reality of needing some basic strategic alignment.

On meeting the China challenge and the persistent threats that are posed from Russia, which again, barring any meaningful response to them, the authorities in Russia and China will persist in using them. It is money in the bank. So, we in free societies, if we want to retain the way we live over time are going to need an approach that is both achievable, sustainable, and has a heavy element of unity.

Justin Kempf: So you've mentioned the need for the United States and other free societies to continue to invest in soft power tools to combat the sharp power that comes from authoritarian governments. Do you feel that America has turned away from soft power tools for the moment with the closure of USAID and shift towards something that's more of a transactional foreign policy?

Christopher Walker: So maybe I'll go back to the definition that Joseph Nye used of soft power coming out of the Cold War. I think it's important to recognize that part of the power and influence that comes from free societies is the fact that we don't rely solely on government or the official realm for the sources of our power. In fact, the private sector in the US and in Europe and other settings where you find free systems are indispensable contributors to this end. In a sense, the governmental piece, the non-governmental piece should positively reinforce each other in that regard. In some ways, that's the way things emerged once the US and its allies found its footing.

During the Cold War there was a high reliance on culture and music and the arts as part of the response. I suspect we lost our bearings on this years ago after the Cold War, in part because we felt we had finished the deal and there was no more work to be done. But I know one observer called the 1990s, the vacation from history. And so we're definitely back in history now. I think the way to answer this is it will be necessary over time for the American public to understand the benefits of its own security and interest to invest in institutions and initiatives that can exert influence in the non-military sphere that give us a competitive advantage.

China and Russia do this in a very, I would say now influential way. But in the end, they are restricted by their own political monopolies. It's not that they have a host of dynamism in these regards in the media space, but they have learned and adapted and competed far better than just about anybody imagined, say from the vantage point of 25 or 30 years ago. Collectively we, certainly in the transatlantic democracies, grossly underestimated this, maybe with the exception of the Baltic states, who were shining a light on the risks that were posed looking forward from the vantage point of the 90s, from potentially revanchist Russia, which of course they were right about.

I think what we optimally would do over time is to invest both in modernized instruments that can help us compete in these domains, but also be incredibly mindful of enabling private sector initiatives that would help give us an advantage against now very purposeful and very well-resourced peer competitors.

Justin Kempf: So you do feel that China's gotten a lot better at sharp power over the years? Because I remember back in 2016-2017, there was a lot of discussion that Russia was incredibly effective at its misinformation and disinformation campaigns and it was very sophisticated and approached it in ways that brought about the ends that they were trying to accomplish whereas China came across as very clumsy in its efforts. Especially with Wolf Warrior diplomacy, they came across as if it was trying to hit people over the head with a stick. It came across as very aggressive, particularly in terms of Australia and other countries, that when it didn't like what you did, you definitely knew about it. Do you think that China's gotten more effective in its approach at sharp power in a way that people don't realize that it's always exercising it, even when it is?

Christopher Walker: I think it's always unwise to underestimate your competitors or adversaries and I think your assessment is correct in the sense that there was sometimes a gross underestimation of the Chinese party state's ability to adapt in these spheres. So the working assumption coming out of the Cold War, certainly in the 90s was that there was a natural advantage for the US and other democracies in the information space, technological space. I still think that's largely true if we organize ourselves properly and then invest in a sustained way. But there was a gross underestimation of the way in which China could and would adapt over time to exert its influence and for the leadership in the country to pursue its preferences.

So right now the Chinese Communist Party is deeply engaged in the media space globally, and it doesn't seek to engender a meaningful pluralistic debate overseas, it's not what they do. They effectively try to pursue the sort of mindset they have at home where they can. So for example in the Chinese language space internationally, the CCP has been highly effective at marginalizing voices that don't either stay silent on criticizing the CCP or amplify its preferences with the rarest of exceptions. You can look at work done by analysts and scholars like Sarah Cook or Anne-Marie Brady who've looked at this closely that will help illuminate how that works. But in the end, it's not about having more diverse voices in the discussion.

On the contrary, it's about having a discussion without a debate, and this is more consistent with this notion of censorship, monopolization of partners, and otherwise sidelining voices or actors that are deemed unwelcome by these powers. I think the opportunity in the space for the US and other democracies. Should we elect to choose it in the coming term is to offer an alternative to that - compete better and actually stay true to our values.

Justin Kempf: So Chris, you've studied sharp power and you've studied authoritarian governments, but I feel like everything really comes back to ideas about democracy and not just what democracy is, but it's fundamental nature and purpose in trying to understand that. So what has studying sharp power and authoritarian governments and the dangers from them really taught you about the nature and purpose of democracy?

Christopher Walker: So democracy is never a cure all for every problem. It is, as others have observed, the best operating system that's available for freedom to be safeguarded, for people to have their rights respected, to express themselves freely. If you look at the other side of the coin, the authoritarian powers which have grown over these past years, those are absolutely things that most people in those settings do not enjoy. They don't enjoy shared prosperity. They don't enjoy an ability to express themselves. Their rights are not systematically protected, on the contrary. And so that's the flip side of things.

In a way, this uncomfortable constellation of factors that has emerged over time in which these powerful authoritarian actors have found themselves embedded within open societies by virtue of globalization and by assumptions made by democracy that engaging these powers would have them reform has, in its own unfortunate and perverse ways, enabled these authoritarian powers to exert far more influence than we would've imagined before and in turn to, at a minimum, nudge and coax and encourage antidemocratic ideas and behaviors within democratic societies, in some cases, nudging powers and actors in those settings in an adverse way.

So, I think what we've learned is you have to be incredibly vigilant to defend democracy. You have to refresh the institutions in these settings in order to make sure that democracy stays strong. And right now we are at a critical point in history where a good deal of fresh thinking is required exactly on this point. If in the end, the more ennobling, benign and freedom-oriented forms of influence prevail, rather than the more malign, controlling, and sharp forms of influence prevail.

Justin Kempf: Well, Chris, thank you so much for joining me today. I want to thank you for all of the publications that you've done in the past and I want to congratulate you for the new position at the Center for European Policy Analysis. I think it's a great fit for you and we're all excited to be able to see the work that you continue to do. Thank you so much

Christopher Walker: Thank you again, Justin, for having me. It's been a real pleasure chatting with you and best of luck with your work.