

ANALYTICAL ESSAY

Global Autocracies: Strategies of Transnational Repression, Legitimation, and Co-Optation in World Politics

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How, when, and why does a state take repressive action against individuals residing outside its territorial jurisdiction? Beyond state-led domestic forms of control over citizens living within their legal borders, autocracies also seek to target those abroad—from African states’ sponsoring violence against exiled dissidents to Central Asian republics’ extraditions of political émigrés, and from the adoption of spyware software to monitor digital activism across Latin America to enforced disappearances of East Asian expatriates. Despite growing global interconnectedness, the field of international studies currently lacks an adequate comparative framework for analyzing how autocracies adapt to growing cross-border mobility. I argue that the rise of global migration flows has contributed to the emergence of “transnational authoritarianism,” as autocracies aim to both maximize material gains from citizens’ “exit” and minimize political risks by controlling their “voice” abroad. I demonstrate that governments develop strategies of transnational repression, legitimation, and co-optation that transcend state borders, as well as co-operation with a range of non-state actors. Bringing work on the international politics of migration in conversation with the literature on authoritarianism, I provide illustrative examples drawn from a range of transnational authoritarian practices by the fifty countries categorized as “Not Free” by Freedom House in 2019, covering much of Africa, Asia, the Middle East, and South America. I sketch an emerging field of international studies research around the novel means that autocracies employ to exercise power over populations abroad, while shedding light on the evolving nature of global authoritarianism.

Resumen: ¿Cómo, cuándo y por qué un Estado toma medidas represivas contra individuos que residen fuera de su competencia territorial? Además de las formas de control interno que ejerce el Estado sobre los ciudadanos que viven dentro de sus fronteras legales, las autocracias también apuntan a quienes están en el extranjero: desde el patrocinio de la violencia de los estados africanos contra los disidentes exiliados hasta las extradiciones de emigrantes políticos por parte de las repúblicas de Asia Central, y desde la implementación de software espía para monitorear el activismo digital en toda América Latina hasta las desapariciones forzadas de los expatriados del este de Asia. Hoy en día, a pesar de la creciente interconexión mundial, el campo de los estudios internacionales carece de un marco comparativo adecuado para analizar el modo en que las autocracias se adaptan a la creciente movilidad transfronteriza. Sostengo que el aumento de los flujos migratorios a nivel mundial ha contribuido

al surgimiento del “autoritarismo transnacional,” ya que las autocracias pretenden maximizar los beneficios materiales de la “salida” de los ciudadanos y, al mismo tiempo, minimizar los riesgos políticos controlando su “voz” en el extranjero. Voy a demostrar que los gobiernos desarrollan estrategias de represión, legitimación y cooptación transnacionales, que trascienden las fronteras del Estado, así como también la cooperación, con una serie de actores no estatales. Al introducir el trabajo sobre las políticas internacionales de migración en un diálogo con la literatura sobre el autoritarismo, brindo ejemplos ilustrativos, extraídos de una serie de prácticas autoritarias transnacionales de los cincuenta países que Freedom House clasificó como “no libres” en 2019, los cuales se encuentran principalmente en África, Asia, Oriente Medio y América del Sur. Introduzco un campo emergente en la investigación de los estudios internacionales en torno a los nuevos medios que emplean las autocracias para ejercer poder sobre las poblaciones que residen en el extranjero y, al mismo tiempo, ilustro la naturaleza evolutiva del autoritarismo a nivel mundial.

Extrait: Comment, quand et pourquoi un État prend-t-il des mesures répressives contre des individus résidant hors de la juridiction de son territoire ? Au-delà des formes de contrôle national exercées par un État sur les citoyens vivant à l’intérieur de ses frontières légales, les autocraties cherchent également à cibler ceux qui se trouvent à l’étranger, qu’il s’agisse du soutien par les États africains de la violence contre les dissidents en exil, des extraditions d’émigrés politiques par les républiques d’Asie centrale, de l’adoption de logiciels espions pour surveiller l’activisme numérique en Amérique latine, ou encore des disparitions forcées d’expatriés d’Asie de l’Est. Malgré l’interconnexion mondiale croissante, un cadre comparatif adéquat permettant d’analyser la manière dont les autocraties s’adaptent à la mobilité transfrontalière croissante manque actuellement dans le domaine des études internationales. Je soutiens que l’augmentation des flux migratoires mondiaux a contribué à l’émergence d’un « autoritarisme transnational », car les autocraties visent à la fois à maximiser les gains matériels résultant de la « sortie » des citoyens et à minimiser les risques politiques en contrôlant leur « voix » à l’étranger. Je démontre que les gouvernements développent des stratégies de répression, de légitimation et de cooptation transnationales qui transcendent les frontières des États, ainsi qu’une coopération avec toute une série d’acteurs non étatiques. J’ai confronté des travaux portant sur la politique internationale de l’immigration avec la littérature portant sur l’autoritarisme afin de fournir des exemples illustratifs tirés d’une série de pratiques autoritaires transnationales adoptées par cinquante pays classés comme « non libres » par Freedom House en 2019, couvrant ainsi une grande partie de l’Afrique, de l’Asie, du Moyen-Orient et de l’Amérique du Sud. J’esquisse par ailleurs un domaine émergent de la recherche en études internationales qui s’axe autour des moyens inédits que les autocraties emploient pour exercer un pouvoir sur les populations à l’étranger, tout en apportant un éclairage sur la nature évolutive de l’autoritarisme mondial.

Keywords: Dictatorships, Migration, Global South, **Palabras clave:** Dictaduras, Migración, Sur global, **Mots clés:** dictatures, migration, pays du sud

When you tie a hen with a long rope, she may think she is free.

—Amharic proverb repeated by Ethiopian Prime Minister Meles Zenawi¹

The October 2018 assassination of Jamal Khashoggi, a Saudi journalist who had migrated to the United States, inside Saudi Arabia's Istanbul consulate served as a brutal demonstration of how authoritarian power in the Middle East is not confined to the boundaries of the nation-state. Autocracies' attempts to control their citizens abroad are widespread—from African states' sponsoring violence against exiled dissidents to Central Asian republics' extraditions of political exiles, and from the adoption of spyware software to monitor digital activism across Latin America to enforced disappearances of East Asian émigrés. A few cases make international headlines: beyond the Khashoggi murder, the March 2018 poisoning attempt on former Russian military officer Sergei Skripal and his daughter in England was also widely reported. Most cases, however, remain out of the public eye: few Western media outlets reported Kuwait's extradition of eight migrants who belong to the Muslim Brotherhood—an Islamist religious and political group—to Egypt in July 2019, where they await long prison sentences. Similarly, eyebrows were not raised in the West when former Azerbaijani parliament member Hüseyn Abdullayev, part of the "Let's Not Keep Silent" opposition campaign, was arrested by Turkish authorities in April 2018 and extradited to Baku—despite the fact that Germany had granted him political asylum a few years earlier. As illiberalism continues to gain power across the global arena, there is a growing need to understand how, when, and why governments take repressive action against their citizens beyond national borders. Yet, the field of international studies currently lacks an adequate comparative framework for comprehending how autocracies adapt to growing cross-border mobility. Researchers working on authoritarian politics, international relations, as well as transnationalism and the sociology of migration have yet to integrate their findings into a unified body of scholarship.

In order to provide a nuanced understanding of how autocracies have responded to global migration, I draw on a number of research agendas and identify the workings of *transnational authoritarianism*, namely any effort to prevent acts of political dissent against an authoritarian state by targeting one or more existing or potential members of its emigrant or diaspora communities. In the first part of this piece, I adopt an interdisciplinary perspective that places the works of Albert O. Hirschman (1970, 1978) and James F. Hollifield (2004) in conversation with each other, as well with research on the international politics of autocratic rule. This maps the historical evolution of transnational authoritarianism: as autocracies identified that their closed-borders strategy was economically infeasible and shifted toward a policy that granted citizens the freedom to emigrate (or, to "exit"), they faced a novel political and security need of managing expressions of political dissent abroad (or, "voice"). Transnational authoritarianism emerged out of autocracies' contradictory needs as they sought to resolve, to paraphrase Hollifield, an *illiberal paradox*—namely, the contrast between the desire to allow mass emigration and the urge to maintain control over political dissent. In the piece's second part, I draw on insights from political sociology and international relations to identify four types of state-led transnational authoritarianism strategies: transnational repression, legitimation, co-optation, and co-operation with non-state actors. I conclude by discussing how this analysis paves the way for a novel area of research in international studies, particularly on the repertoires of authoritarianism across the Global South as well as Western democracies' engagement in illiberal extraterritorial practices.

¹ Quoted in Aalen (2011, 53).

Migration and the International Politics of Authoritarianism

Political scientists researching authoritarianism traditionally adopted an intra-state focus. More recently, scholars have examined the drivers that motivate actors to promote or hinder democratization abroad (Whitehead 1996; Levitsky and Way 2006), while others investigate the effects of such actions on authoritarian regime durability (Yom 2016). A strand of the literature has also focused on the politics of cross-border mobility in terms of Western destination countries' relations with authoritarian countries of origin and/or transit, either in the context of Cold War bipolarity (Zolberg 1995) or in the management of forced migration (Betts and Loescher 2011). An emerging line of research examines how authoritarian regimes themselves behave in the international arena (Tansey 2016), by focusing on processes of diffusion (Darwich 2017), learning (Heydemann and Leenders 2011), or interstate cooperation (Weyland 2017). Yet, while this work identifies key socio-political and security dynamics in transnational authoritarian contexts (Cooley and Heathershaw 2017), it does not theorize on specific policies toward citizens beyond the territorial boundaries of the authoritarian nation-state. This absence is particularly noticeable given the importance of citizens abroad for the survival of an autocratic regime: research has identified that they may challenge non-democracies via diasporic activism (Betts and Jones 2016), or they may reinforce the position of a hegemonic party via out-of-country voting (Brand 2010). Migrant remittances might strengthen authoritarianism in certain sending states (Ahmed 2012), or destabilize it in others (Escribà-Folch, Meseguer, and Wright 2018). Expatriates may affect processes of conflict at home (Miller and Ritter 2014), as well as transmit back information about social and political norms, including democratic values (Pérez-Armendáriz 2014).

A similar gap exists in migration studies due to the historical tendency to approach the management of cross-border mobility through a Western lens focusing on immigration (Natter 2018; Adamson and Tsourapas 2020). This perspective has identified the considerable material gains that countries of origin—authoritarian or otherwise—stand to gain from mass emigration, primarily in the form of remittances (De Haas 2010). Yet, contrary to the expectations of this line of thinking, not all autocracies allow mass emigration (Miller and Peters 2020). Even those that do may continue to target specific citizens living abroad. The subfield of diaspora studies has shed some light on such practices, although the sizeable literature on democracies' diaspora policies is not mirrored in work on authoritarian states' extraterritorial practices, which remains limited to single- or small-*N* research (Østergaard-Nielsen 2003; Brand 2006; Glasius 2017; Baser and Öztürk 2020). At the same time, it is debatable whether autocracies' specific strategies toward political exiles, émigrés, or other individuals abroad who are perceived as threats to a regime constitute part of a state's broader "diaspora" policy. In fact, in the context of Global South politics, these would tend to fall under the jurisdiction of Ministries of Interior, Security, or Defense rather than Ministries of Foreign Affairs, Migration, or Diaspora.²

Smaller groups of literature on security studies, propaganda, and intelligence shed more light onto autocracies' rationale behind their strategies toward political dissidents abroad. Scholars of Cold War politics identify how political calculations influenced autocracies' management of their citizens' cross-border mobility, as communist countries feared an exodus of dissatisfied citizens—in this context, material considerations appear to matter less than security exigencies: the German Democratic Republic's decision to construct the Berlin Wall was a clear demonstration of political calculations (Dowty 1989). If dissidents did escape abroad, certain autocracies would seek to punish them from afar, as in the case of the Soviet Union (Krasnov 1985). Other regimes appear to downplay security concerns in favor of

² I thank an anonymous reviewer for raising this important point.

the economic gains of liberalizing their border controls—for instance, Mexico or Egypt in the 1970s (Fitzgerald 2006; Tsourapas 2015)—or, at least, allowing groups of people to emigrate at specific points in time as a “safety valve” strategy that would help stabilize the regime further, as in the case of Cuba (Hoffmann 2005; Barry et al. 2014). These states often devised strategies of monitoring citizens’ behavior abroad and, when necessary, taking action against émigrés’ political activism. For much of the second half of the twentieth century, Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia maintained large networks of surveillance, control, and punishment of members of their communities across Western Europe (Brand 2006; Collyer 2006). Overall, there appears to be a cost–benefit analysis of mass emigration from the perspective of authoritarian regimes, as they seek to maximize the material benefits of liberalizing emigration and border controls while minimizing the political and security risks associated with it. As mass migration tends to become the norm rather than the exception in world politics, how can this tension (or, more broadly, autocracies’ policymaking vis-à-vis their citizens abroad) be theoretically and historically understood?

James F. Hollifield (2004) established that contemporary states are “migration states,” for which the control of cross-border mobility is central to state logic. By examining immigration policymaking in Western Europe and North America, Hollifield identified the existence of a “liberal paradox.” On the one hand, states wish to encourage the free flow of immigrant labor for economic purposes, but on the other hand, they seek to maintain immigration restrictions for political and security reasons. Put differently, contemporary migration states remain trapped in their need to balance economic and political exigencies: “[I]n order to maintain a competitive advantage, governments must keep their economies and societies open to trade, investment, and migration. But unlike goods, capital, and services, the movement of people involves greater political risks” (Hollifield 2004, 886–87). Notwithstanding its contribution to the literature on the politics of migration, the liberal paradox thesis focuses exclusively on policymaking across liberal democratic destination countries of the Global North (Adamson and Tsourapas 2019b). Do countries of origin across the Global South—frequently authoritarian—face a similar dilemma between maximizing economic gains and minimizing political and security risks from mass emigration? I argue for the existence of an *illiberal paradox* across authoritarian migration states: on the one hand, autocracies seek to control their borders and restrict emigration because of domestic political and security reasons—citizens’ right to travel abroad comes into conflict with autocracies’ wish to maintain order and eliminate dissent; on the other hand, autocracies wish to encourage emigration under an economic rationale that relies on free cross-border mobility to increase migrant remittances, lower unemployment, and address any pressures of overpopulation.

How do autocracies attempt to escape the illiberal paradox? For much of their history, authoritarian regimes tended to prioritize politics over economics by securitizing emigration at the border: the freedom to travel abroad was a privilege, rather than a right, for citizens of mercantilist regimes or, more recently, communist regimes. This securitization assumed a number of forms, from the creation of “blacklists” of political dissenters banned from travelling abroad to the denaturalization of nationals who emigrated without authorization—measures prevalent in much of the “Second” and “Third” Worlds (Messina 1994). Although autocracies continue to prioritize border controls today, mass migration has become more prevalent due to the rise of economic interdependence, technological advances or, more broadly, processes of globalization. Numerous autocracies—such as Turkey and Mexico—already signed bilateral migration agreements with Global North states for much of the twentieth century. Since the 1970s, a number of authoritarian regimes—including China and Egypt—espoused mass emigration while another such wave of liberalization occurred in the aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union. Arguably, the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea is the

only remaining authoritarian regime today that adheres to an isolationist policy that forbids emigration.

Although the shift toward mass emigration offers autocracies considerable material benefits, it does not automatically resolve the illiberal paradox. In fact, Albert Hirschman (1970, 1978) has identified the mutually exclusive processes of *exit* versus *voice*. In the context of migration politics, citizens that are dissatisfied in an existing polity can either protest against it—i.e., exercise voice—or emigrate—i.e., engage in exit (cf. Dowding et al. 2000).³ In recent years, work on transnationalism and diaspora mobilization demonstrates that Hirschman's binary is not clear-cut. Migrants are able to exercise their voice against authoritarian rule back home, as research on transnational advocacy networks and human rights issues also demonstrates (Keck and Sikkink 1998).⁴ How do autocracies respond to the political and security risks generated by émigrés' voice? One possibility would be for them to return to the mercantilist and communist tradition of restricting mass emigration, but that would produce severe economic and political drawbacks at an era of global interconnectedness. In fact, recent trends suggest that autocracies are attempting to bypass the illiberal paradox altogether: they seek to reap the material benefits of free movement while ensuring that migrant and diaspora groups pose little political or security threat to their survival. The next section details the emergence of *transnational authoritarianism* and delineates the main types of transnational authoritarian practices that illustrate its workings.

Transnational Authoritarianism in World Politics

I conceptualize transnational authoritarianism as any effort to prevent acts of political dissent against an authoritarian state by targeting one or more existing or potential members of its emigrant or diaspora communities (Tsourapas 2019b). While autocracies' attempts to silence dissent abroad may go as far back as the emergence of the nation-state, transnational authoritarianism emerges in the context of specific bilateral and regional migration agreements as well as, on a global scale, once state borders soften in the second half of the twentieth century. The growth of extra-state repressive action in recent years is further buttressed by a number of factors—for one, technological advances have facilitated individuals' physical mobility across state borders as well as their ability to mobilize across state borders. Internet communication technologies (ICTs) have also minimized the cost of disseminating information on a global scale. At the same time, autocracies are increasingly able to monitor, discipline, and punish dissenters abroad, with surveillance technology becoming widely available. Importantly, in the aftermath of the "War on Terror," a wider global shift towards illiberalism provides the normative underpinnings for autocracies to extend their repressive strategies beyond state borders.

In order to understand how transnational authoritarianism works, I build on Gerschewski's (2013) framework on the three pillars of autocratic stability—namely, repression, legitimation, and co-optation—as it has been applied to the politics of migration and diasporas (Glasius 2017, Tsourapas 2019a). I synthesize existing work into specific sub-categories of transnational repression, legitimation, and co-optation strategies (Moss 2016; Cooley and Heathershaw 2017; Lemon 2019; Öztürk and Taş 2020). Finally, I expand on Adamson's work on diasporas' practices of transnational repression (2020), by identifying how states cooperate with a number of non-state actors, namely diaspora groups, multi-national corporations (MNCs), international organizations (IOs), and ICTs. Table 1 visually demonstrates

³ I thank an anonymous reviewer for this important point.

⁴ Hirschman has also introduced the concept of loyalty, which he downplayed in later work, and which is not discussed here.

Table 1. Strategies of transnational authoritarianism toward populations abroad

Repression	Legitimation	Co-optation	Cooperation with non-state actors
Surveillance Threats Coercion-by-proxy Enforced disappearances Coerced return Lethal retribution	Patriotism Exile	Patronage Blacklisting	Diasporas MNCs IOs ICTs

how autocracies are able to draw on a wide range of repressive and non-repressive strategies in their targeting of political dissent beyond their borders.

In terms of methodology, I recognize the challenges involved in data collection on this topic: beyond a range of difficulties in conducting research in non-democratic contexts (Grimm et al. 2020), work on cross-border mobility necessitates, by default, attention to multiple geographical contexts. At the same time, a project on transnational authoritarianism needs to tackle multiple potential research biases: for one, states' extra-territorial repression practices may never become public knowledge (cases of enforced disappearances, for instance, are particularly difficult to detect); at the same time, interstate cooperation or non-states actors' involvement blurs researchers' ability to identify the exact culprits in each instance; academics working on transnational authoritarianism have often found themselves targeted by the very autocracies they seek to study; most importantly, the cases that do become public focus primarily on elites abroad or high-profile émigrés, as non-elites may be more reluctant to identify themselves as targets of transnational authoritarianism, thereby further limiting our understanding of this phenomenon via omission bias.

Taking these issues into account, I draw on a diverse range of primary sources including two original datasets, namely the Exeter Central Asian Studies Network and Freedom House's findings on transnational repression,⁵ international media accounts, as well as statements and interviews by individuals familiar with—or subjected to—transnational authoritarian practices. In order to provide as wide a sample of cases as possible and draw on events that might not be reported to the media, I also incorporate analyses of memoirs (Ghebreselassie 2010; Mosadiq 2015), as well as autobiographical works (Matar 2016; Aswany 2008). I triangulate these findings with detailed reports from a number of non-governmental organizations. In order to ensure adequate coverage of the widest range of autocracies possible, I examine the strategies of the fifty states identified as “Not Free” by Freedom House (2019), which evaluates the state of freedom in 195 countries and fifteen territories during calendar year 2018. I identify how they engage in transnational authoritarianism of at least one type (see Supplementary File for a visual representation). Finally, a note on terminology: I consciously avoid the term “diaspora” or “diaspora policy” to discuss strategies of transnational authoritarianism for two reasons. First, such strategies tend to target specific individuals or networks, rather than a country's entire diasporic population abroad; second, I recognize that exiled communities often may not wish to be identified as “diaspora”—many Rwandans abroad, for example, prefer the term “refugee”, because they view the term “diaspora” as indicating government sponsorship or approval (Betts and Jones 2016, 118).⁶ The following session discusses each type of transnational authoritarianism, as well as the separate sub-types.

⁵The Exeter dataset is available here: <https://excas.net>. The Freedom House project's findings are forthcoming; for more information, see: <https://freedomhouse.org/issues/authoritarian-reach>.

⁶I thank the anonymous reviewer for this important point.

Strategies of Transnational Repression

Surveillance

Chinese policemen asked my brother [in Xinjiang for] my phone number. In November 2014, [they] approached my brother and forced him to call me. They took over the phone call and told me that I had to provide information on other Uyghurs in the Netherlands. Otherwise they would take my brother.

—An Uyghur factory worker in the Netherlands⁷

Surveillance may serve as an instrument of controlling “voice” abroad in multiple ways: mirroring extensive repression within Uzbekistan itself, the Uzbek government has “designed a system where surveillance and the expectation of surveillance [abroad] is not the exception, but the norm,” according to [Amnesty International \(2020b\)](#). As one refugee activist in Sweden argued, “if we call our relatives, friends and families [in Uzbekistan], everything will be heard, we know that” ([Amnesty International 2020b](#)). Some authoritarian regimes have attempted to control émigrés abroad indiscriminately—as in the case of North Africa ([Brand 2006](#); [Collyer 2006](#)). Syrian authorities systematically note the activities of expatriates abroad, including recording street demonstrations and other protests, as well as monitoring mobile phones and internet usage across Canada, Chile, France, Germany, Spain, Sweden, the United Kingdom, and the United States ([Amnesty International 2011](#)). Other regimes appear more focused: Turkey engages in “long-distance policing” of specific opposition groups abroad, predominantly Kurdish organizations such as Kurdistan Workers’ Party ([Østergaard-Nielsen 2003](#), 118–19). Turkmenistan pays particular attention to the activities of its students abroad ([Human Rights Watch 2018c](#)), as does China: a Chinese student in Vancouver argued that “[w]e self-police ourselves Everybody is scared. Just this fear, I think creating the fear, it actually works” ([Human Rights Watch 2020](#)). Autocracies also adopt specific methods of transnational surveillance—Cuba, Sudan, and the Persian Gulf countries depend on ICTs, as will be discussed below ([Lamoureux and Sureau 2019](#); [Suárez 2019](#)). Ethiopia has been accused of using *FinSpy*, a software program that pulls users’ passwords, records telephone calls with a computer microphone, turns on a webcam, and saves keystrokes and text messages ([Timberg 2014](#)). Other regimes rely on their embassy and consular networks: in Egypt, where exiles have fled in a number of waves over the last seventy years ([Dunne and Hamzawy 2019](#)), the military regime tasks staff abroad with spying on the activities of its diaspora communities (cf. [Aswany 2008](#)). Beyond allegations of specific embassies reporting on citizens ([Ahram Online 2016](#)), embassy delegates and diplomats frequently attend lectures, events, and exhibitions on Egypt—even academic conferences—in order to gather intelligence on speakers and attendees ([Ramadan 2016](#)).

One autocracy that is particularly adept at using surveillance abroad is Eritrea, which accrues tremendous economic benefits from emigration and has addressed the illiberal paradox via close monitoring of its citizens abroad. The Eritrean community abroad had already been politicized during a long war of independence against Ethiopia between 1961 and 1991 ([Hepner 2009](#)), but the ruling regime has stepped up its efforts under President Isaias Afwerki, who took power in 1993. The introduction of open-ended national service (including a minimum six months of military service) in 1995 led to a second wave of exiles seeking to avoid conscription, who are now being targeted by the regime ([Human Rights Watch 2018a](#)). Eritreans “have to constantly look over their shoulders and watch every word they say” ([Amnesty International 2019b](#)). Filming of demonstrations is a particularly prominent form of surveillance and intimidation, while Eritreans abroad are always

⁷Quoted in [Amnesty International \(2020a\)](#).

mindful of multiple networks of potential spies (Bozzini 2015). The fact that many exiles are expected to register in local embassies diminishes their capacity for political activism, as “spies frequent all public places, and the atmosphere of mutual mistrust has helped to stabilize the system,” one Sweden-based Eritrean journalist argues (Hirt and Mohammad 2017, 236). The feeling of not knowing who one can trust is pervasive: Eritrean-born Daniel Ghebreselassie’s memoir describes how, upon arriving in Sudan, his contact immediately mentioned that “we need to be careful as there are many Eritrean spies [who] look to catch the newly arrived . . . We were not sure whether [our contact] will help us frankly or try to deceive us.” Later, Ghebreselassie adds: “[our contact] told us that we had frightened him the previous night. His friend [had] called him from Eritrea and told him that his regiment was sending some agents to capture him and bring him back to Eritrea. At first he thought we [had come] to arrest him” (Ghebreselasse 2010). Another Eritrean living in Europe reportedly “chose to blur information systematically about his place of residence,” as he pretended to be in Lausanne rather than his actual country of residence. He “was even using a Facebook account (posting pictures and so forth) to deliberately deceive people about the European country where he resided” (Bozzini 2015, 43).

Threats

When you are kicked out of Europe, you will have nowhere else to go. And then you will answer to me for every word.

—Head of the Chechen Republic Ramzan Akhmadovich Kadyrov⁸

The Chechen community in Germany—some 50,000 people—have been the target of threats by Ramzan Kadyrov’s regime, the Kremlin-backed leader of the autonomous Russian republic of Chechnya. Movsar Eskarkhanov, the first openly gay Chechen refugee to publicly denounce Kadyrov in an interview with *Time*, renounced his claims in a second interview with a German-based correspondent for ChGTRK, the Chechen state broadcaster, stating that “the Western journalists gave me drugs [and] forced me to disgrace the Chechen leader.” He apologized for “disgracing” Chechnya, claiming that his “mental illness” spurred him to say “even one bad word” about Kadyrov. Eskarkhanov later admitted that his second interview was coerced: “they made it clear that if I continue to talk, there would be problems” (The Moscow Times 2017). Elsewhere, autocracies may threaten host states: when Dutch authorities placed restrictions on Turkish officials seeking to promote the campaign for a “yes” vote in the 2017 constitutional referendum across Turkish citizens living in the Netherlands, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan did not mince his words: he called the Dutch “Nazi remnants,” threatened to retaliate in the “harshest ways,” including sanctions (Koinova 2017). In 2019, China asserted that Sweden will “suffer the consequences” for awarding a freedom of speech prize to the detained Chinese-born Swedish publisher Gui Minhai (Flood 2019). While evaluating the success of intimidation is beyond the scope of this piece, such tactics appear to have an effect on migrant communities. Chechens in Germany, for instance, have often voiced their disappointment with local authorities’ lack of protection. According to one Chechen in Berlin, “the Russians and Kadyrovtsy have their own headquarters here, right here in Germany. . . dogs here have more rights than us. You kill a dog, you face punishment. You kill a Chechen? Go on, no problem” (Hauer 2019). Exiles are aware of the long reach of autocratic regimes: back in 1991, Saad al-Jabr, an outspoken Iraqi critic of the Saddam Hussein regime living in Britain, recalled how:

⁸ Quoted in Hauer (2019).

The Iraqi cultural attaché in London came to visit me [with] a message for me from Saddam. He said there were just a few words ... The message was, “If Saad hides in a matchbox, I will find him.” It always stayed with me, that message ... In other words, there was no escaping Saddam if he wanted to get me (Sciolino 1991, 92).

An Arab leader that relied on intimidation in managing political opposition abroad was Muammar Gaddafi, who seized power in Libya in 1969. As the regime liberalized emigration for economic purposes, it addressed the illiberal paradox via transnational repression: Gaddafi would publicly describe many of those who had fled abroad as traitors to the Libyan state or, more frequently, *kullāb dāla* (“stray dogs”), and would threaten retribution (Pargeter 2012). The regime would often conflate threats against émigrés that sought refuge in Europe or North America with anti-Westernism: in his 1982 “Day of Vengeance” speech, Gaddafi claimed that “these stray dogs composed of ex-premiers who are traitors and hirelings . . . They demean the Libyan people because they sold out Libya . . . There shall be no mercy for the agents of America. The escaped hirelings, enemies of the Libyan people, shall not escape from this people” (quoted in Ross 1982). Libya also carried such threats through, and violence against émigrés was commonplace. An assassination program in the United Kingdom was reportedly spearheaded by Moussa Koussa, nicknamed *mab’ūth al-mawt* (“envoy of death”). In 1980, Koussa was formally removed from his position as a public envoy in London after publicly admitting these practices to *The Times* (June 11, 1980): “We killed two in London and there were another two to be killed . . . I approve of this.” One of the most chilling instances involved Al-Sadek Hamed al-Shuwahdy, a Libyan student in the United States. He was forcibly returned to Libya in 1984 and placed in the middle of a packed stadium. After he tearfully confessed that he had been one of the “stray dogs,” a gallows was brought into the arena and al-Shuwahdy was hanged on live state television (Black 2011). Not surprisingly, Libyans abroad would rarely discuss homeland politics:

When we met Libyans, a lot of them were scared. If I say hey, “Gaddafi-this,” everybody was like, “shut the hell up ... I can’t even hang around with you!” They’re here [in the United States] and they didn’t even have free speech (Moss 2016, 487).

Coerced Return

Wherever they may go, we will wrap them up and bring them here, God willing. And here they will be held to account.

—Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan⁹

Authoritarian regimes also develop a range of strategies aiming at coercing citizens to return to the homeland. One form is renditions, particularly when linked to interstate migration diplomacy strategies (Adamson and Tsourapas 2019a): Öztürk and Taş describe how Turkey requested the extradition of 504 people suspected to be part of the Gülen movement from 91 countries—107 “fugitives” had been brought back by March 2019 (2020, 63). Similar reports exist on the Rwandan community in Uganda (Betts and Jones 2016, 148). In 2019, Tanzanian authorities unlawfully coerced more than 200 unregistered asylum seekers into returning to Burundi by threatening to withhold their legal status in Tanzania (Amnesty International 2019c). Georgian authorities have been suspected of aiding in the May 2017 disappearance of Azeri opposition journalist Afgan Mukhtarli in Tbilisi, where he had been living in self-imposed exile since 2015. At the time of his disappearance, Mukhtarli had been investigating the business holdings of the family of Azeri President Ilham Aliyev in Georgia for the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (BBC 2017). Two months later, Mukhtarli resurfaced

⁹ Quoted in Schenkan (2018).

in Azerbaijan, and was sentenced to a six-year prison term. In 2017, the Egyptian government arrested hundreds of Uyghurs living in Egypt and handed them to the Chinese government; many were never seen again ([Amnesty International 2019a](#)). Beyond renditions, another extralegal strategy involves forcing individuals either to appear at consulates or embassies abroad, where they are apprehended, or to fly back to their country of origin themselves: in 2017, Uyghurs studying abroad were ordered to return home, with family members being held hostage by Chinese authorities until they did ([Radio Free Asia 2017a](#)).

Cooperation on matters of coerced return is frequent in the case of Thailand, which is yet to respect the principle of *non-refoulement* that prohibits states from returning an individual to a country where they may face torture or other human rights violations. In fact, Thailand has invariably cooperated with authoritarian regimes' requests for extradition of refugees, asylum seekers, and other individuals in its territory. In 2017, despite United Nations warnings, Thai authorities transferred Muhammet Furkan Sökmen, a Turkish national accused of ties to the Gülen movement, to Turkey ([Human Rights Watch 2017b](#)). In 2015, Thailand also reportedly returned to China approximately 100 alleged Uyghurs ([Human Rights Watch 2017c](#)). The country has also been known to subject prominent Chinese critics to illicit renditions: journalist and activist Li Xin disappeared while seeking refuge in Thailand in January 2016, only to reportedly re-appear in China a few days later ([Buckley 2016a](#)). Jiang Yefei and Dong Guanping, two Chinese citizens who had been designated as refugees by UNHCR and relocated to Thailand, were deported to China in November 2015, in what Amnesty International called “a worrying new pattern of China putting pressure on third-party countries to repatriate dissidents and others who have left China for economic and social reasons,” that includes a rising number of ethnic Uyghurs ([Buckley 2015](#)). At the same time, Thailand has been identified as endangering the lives of refugees and asylum seekers via unofficial deportations—namely, towing boats of people out to sea—particularly with regard to Rohingya—a Muslim minority group in Burma ([Bhaumik 2011](#)).

Enforced Disappearances

... We may never know all of the facts surrounding the murder of Mr. Jamal Khashoggi. In any case, our relationship is with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

—United States President Donald J. Trump¹⁰

The use of enforced disappearances frequently targets high-profile dissidents: in Rwanda, the Rwandan Patriotic Front does not tolerate political opponents or outspoken critics abroad, who frequently vanish ([Human Rights Watch 2014](#)). The disappearance of five people associated with the Causeway Bay Books independent bookstore in Hong Kong (specializing in books on Chinese politics that are not available in the People's Republic) sparked concern for state-led renditions and contributed to the rise of Hong Kong's Anti-Extradition Law Amendment Bill Movement ([Palmer 2018](#)). Under Gaddafi, many Libyan dissidents also mysteriously disappeared, such as former Minister of Foreign Affairs (1972–1973) Mansour Rashid El-Kikhia, who was granted an American citizenship and helped found the Arab Organization of Human Rights. He disappeared in Cairo in 1993, and his remains were only discovered in Libya in 2012 ([Tsourapas 2020](#)). Declassified documents reveal the extent of *Operation Condor*, under which the United States worked with South American military regimes to “disappear” hundreds of political émigrés from Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Paraguay, and Uruguay in the 1970s—as well as, later on, from Ecuador and Peru ([McSherry 2002](#)). Beyond the involvement of liberal democracies, such as the United States, in such strategies, a pattern

¹⁰ Quoted in [The White House \(2018\)](#).

of interstate autocratic cooperation appears to emerge: for instance, numerous Thai political dissidents have disappeared since they went into exile following the 2014 military coup d'état (Chachavalpongpun 2019), particularly in Laos (Human Rights Watch 2019a). At the same time, in mid-2019, Od Sayavong, a refugee from Laos and prominent critic of the Lao government, disappeared in Bangkok (Lamb 2019). Non-elites are also targeted, although we cannot know the true extent of this practice: countless Eritreans and Egyptians have disappeared abroad (Bozzini 2015, 40). Authoritarian regimes such as Turkey or Syria encourage émigrés to visit embassies or consulates abroad, where they are duly apprehended (Öztürk and Taş 2020; Tsourapas 2020). When China launched a campaign of mass detention of Uyghurs, Kazakhs, and other predominantly Muslim ethnic groups in 2014, it targeted members of the Uyghur community abroad in a similar fashion: Uyghurs living in Canada and Australia have reported receiving repeated calls urging them to pick up “important” documents from local Chinese embassies, while stories of embassy staff “catching” individuals and sending them back to “re-education camps” in Xinjiang abound (Amnesty International 2020a).

One country that has relied on enforced disappearances to target dissent abroad is Saudi Arabia, which encourages its citizens' mobility for educational and developmental purposes but seeks to control “voice” abroad. Beyond the Khashoggi assassination (Hearst 2018), Saudi Arabia frequently attempts to abduct émigrés that it considers enemies of the state. In 2018, the Saudi Embassy in Cairo contacted Prince Khaled bin Farhan al-Saud, a critic of the regime's human rights record, in order to “mend relations” by offering him \$5.5 million. Bin Farhan realised there was “a dangerous catch” when he was told that “he could collect his payment only if he personally came to a Saudi embassy or consulate.” The regime extended similar overtures to Saudi dissident Omar Abdulaziz in Canada: “they encouraged him to stop his activism and return home, urging him to visit the Saudi Embassy to renew his passport” (Mohyeldin 2019). Loujain al Hathloul, a Saudi women's rights activist, was kidnapped while studying in the United Arab Emirates in 2018 and rendered to Saudi Arabia. Back in 2003, regime critic Sultan bin Turki bin Abdulaziz—a member of the royal family—was allegedly drugged in Geneva and taken to Riyadh. He escaped to Europe but was reportedly lured into boarding a Saudi plane once more in 2016 and has since disappeared. In fact, such Saudi practices span back to the 1979 abduction of opposition leader Nassir al-Sa'id in Beirut, whose whereabouts remain unknown (Allinson 2019).

Coercion-By-Proxy

My mother [in Syria] told me, “I understand we all want to voice our opinions. I understand we live in America, it's a free country. But you've got to think of the others. Don't be selfish. You're not the one who's going to face the harm—they are.” That's why [we were] quiet for a year.

—A Syrian activist living abroad¹¹

Rather than target a particular dissenter abroad, autocracies may choose to threaten or punish their family members back home. Coercion-by-proxy constitutes the actual or threatened use of physical or other sanctions against an individual within the territorial jurisdiction of a state, for the purpose of repressing a target individual residing outside its territorial jurisdiction (Adamson & Tsourapas 2020). In Iran, the regime interrogated the family of Vahid Pourostad, a digital activist working abroad, in an effort to dissuade him from publishing. They also targeted the father of journalist Masih Alinejad, who campaigns for women's rights online: “nine times they took him and told him that his daughter is morally corrupt, that she is against Islam, she works with Israel against our country. My father doesn't

¹¹ Quoted in Moss (2016).

talk to me anymore” (Michaelsen 2018, 258). Similar reports appear in the cases of Djibouti (MENA Rights Group 2019), Bahrain (Human Rights Watch 2019b), and Turkey (Öztürk and Taş 2020). Uzbek refugees in Europe are “too afraid to contact their loved ones at home due to the terrible risk it can expose them to” (Amnesty International 2020b). Numerous reports point to Venezuelans abroad fearing for the safety of their family members back home (Garsd 2018; BBC News 2019b). But coercion-by-proxy extends beyond threats to exiles’ networks back home: Chinese dissident student leaders testified before Congress about family members being threatened with the loss of their jobs and instructed to ask students to cease any political activism (Eftimiades 2017). When Mohammed al-Fazari, an Omani human rights defender and blogger, defied a travel ban and sought asylum in the United Kingdom, authorities targeted his family: in 2015, his brother was detained for three weeks without charge while, in 2017, al-Fazari’s family was barred from travelling abroad (Human Rights Watch 2017a). The United Arab Emirates employ harassment techniques against not only family members, but also friends and mere acquaintances of dissidents abroad: “Our cousins and friends all cut us off, because anyone who would frequent our home would be summoned and asked detailed questions about us and our lives,” argued one Emirati living abroad. “You become a pariah in society,” said another (Human Rights Watch 2019e).

In addressing the illiberal paradox, Egypt has been developing a range of transnational authoritarian practices since it liberalized its emigration policy in the early 1970s (Tsourapas 2019a), but coercion-by-proxy practices have become commonplace following the 2013 reconsolidation of the military regime. Between 2016 and 2019, Human Rights Watch identified twenty-nine Egyptian journalists, media workers, and political and human rights activists living abroad whose family members have been targeted by the regime: fourteen dissidents’ homes of relatives were visited or raided; eight dissidents’ relatives were banned from travel or had their passports confiscated; in eleven cases, relatives were detained or prosecuted (Human Rights Watch 2019d). In the case of activist Wael Ghonim, the arrest of his brother came a few days after he rejected a request to “stay silent” from an Egyptian intelligence officer in Washington, DC. Mohamed Ali, who lives in self-imposed exile, has produced numerous videos on alleged government corruption stirring numerous protests in Egypt (Wintour 2019). In response to his first video, the regime raided his company’s offices in Cairo, arresting at least seven of his employees; following his second video, two of his cousins living in Alexandria were reported missing. Ali’s father subsequently appeared on a pro-government television show denouncing his son (Human Rights Watch 2019d).

Lethal Retribution

If someone speaks the truth, he will be killed

—A Chechen living in Germany¹²

Lethal retribution involves the actual or attempted assassination of dissidents residing abroad. In some instances, authoritarian regimes are unwilling to accept responsibility: in 2019, the European Union imposed sanctions against Iran in response to allegations that it was involved in a number of assassinations against Iranian émigrés across Europe, including the death of two Dutch nationals of Iranian origin. The Iranian foreign minister responded that “accusing Iran won’t absolve Europe of responsibility for harboring terrorists” (Schwartz and Bergman 2019). In July 2019, an improvised explosive device was discovered at the television station of Nicaraguan investigative journalist Carlos Fernando Chamorro Barrios in Costa Rica, where he had been living and working in exile for less than half a year

¹² Quoted in Hauer (2019).

(Thaler and Mosinger 2019). The Karimov regime in Uzbekistan has been known to conduct a range of assassinations in Turkey and elsewhere (Farooq 2015). In other instances, autocracies may be more likely to identify themselves as culprits, as in the case of Gaddafi's Libya or Rwanda: in January 2014, the body of former intelligence chief Patrick Karegeya was found, apparently murdered, in South Africa. When asked about this, Rwandan President Paul Kagame warned that "whoever betrays the country will pay the price." Regime insider James Kabarebe remarked that, "when you choose to be a dog, you die like a dog . . . There is nothing we can do about it, and we should not be interrogated over it" (Thomson 2018, 234). Saddam Hussein arguably "made assassination part of Iraq's official foreign policy" from 1980 onward, as Iraqi exiles were publicly targeted in London, California, and across the Middle East. Mahdi al-Hakim, a political dissident and member of the Shiite al-Hakim family, was lured out of Britain for an Islamic conference in Sudan where he was gunned down in the lobby of the Khartoum Hilton hotel in January 1988. It emerged that the Iraqi intelligence service had organized the conference with the aim of luring al-Hakim out of Britain as they "did not want to assassinate al-Hakim on British soil and thus risk damaging their good relations with the government of Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher" (Sciolino 1991, 92).

One state with a long tradition in engaging in lethal retribution in terms of transnational authoritarianism is Russia (Krasnov 1985). A history of violence against its citizens abroad dates back to the early Soviet years, as Moscow targeted those opposed to the Bolsheviks who had migrated abroad (the so-called "white émigrés"). The Soviet secret police, the OGPU, was believed to be implicated in the political assassinations of Pyotr Wrangel and Alexander Kutepov in Paris. From 1934 onward, the People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs (NKVD) became responsible for such efforts, including the 1940 assassination of high-profile political dissident Leon Trotsky in Mexico City. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia has been implicated in violence against citizens that have received political asylum in Western countries—most notably, the poisoning of Alexander Litvinenko in London (2006), and Sergei and Yulia Skripal in Salisbury (2018). Many of these cases remain unresolved—for instance, Mikhail Lesin, the former media director of Gazprom who had relocated to the United States in 2011, was found dead in a Washington, DC hotel room as a result of a blunt force trauma to his head; former business tycoon Boris Berezovsky, who had been granted asylum in the United Kingdom in 2003, was found dead in 2013 under mysterious circumstances, following two alleged unsuccessful assassination attempts in 2003 and 2007 (Erickson 2018).

Strategies of Transnational Legitimation

Patriotism

Regarding the excesses of some of our compatriots of the diaspora, whether or not they still have Cameroonian nationality, I believe they should, out of patriotism, refrain from using negative language against their country of origin.

—Cameroon President Paul Biya¹³

Beyond repression, authoritarian states engage in a wide variety of strategies of transnational legitimation, in an effort to sponsor sentiments of patriotism across migrant and diaspora communities abroad. In the case of Morocco and Tunisia, the state fostered a number of events across European locations with high concentration of expatriates—these included not only celebrations of national festivals, parties and cultural activities, performances of folk groups from the home country, but also Arabic classes (Brand 2006). Autocracies may rely on the patriotic

¹³ Biya 2019.

sentiments of their diaspora communities on mobilizing vis-à-vis specific policy issues: the reaction of Chinese mainlanders living abroad to the 2019 Hong Kong protests is one example (Qian 2019). A number of regimes may also incorporate certain individuals abroad in their transnational legitimization tactics: Rwandan opposition activism by exiles in Uganda, for instance, is typically hindered by fears of infiltration by regime loyalists, be they paid or not (Betts and Jones 2016, 148–49). A Syrian in Sweden explains how “I had lots of Arab friends, Egyptians and Palestinians for instance; but I avoided Syrians. There was no way of knowing whether they would report to the embassy . . . perhaps as many as every second Syrian abroad work as informers for the regime” (Jörum 2015). Transnational authoritarianism may also rely on the patriotism of citizens abroad in order to materially sustain the sending state, as a sizeable body of literature identifies the importance of remittances in the development of countries of origin (De Haas 2010). Some autocracies make this an explicit policy: since its independence from Ethiopia in 1993, the Eritrean state has levied a two percent income tax on all expatriates, as well as imposing fines on deserters’ families at home that are, then, forced to seek further economic support from relatives abroad (Bozzini 2015, 35). According to UK-based Eritrean human rights activist Noel Joseph:

Basically, anything you need from the state—if you want to write a will or get a power-of-attorney for your family or to send parcels home or get a passport—you need a clearance document and you do not get the document without paying the 2% tax . . . The message is: no matter how far you’ve gone, we will always find a way of affecting your life (Jones 2015).

China is a prominent example of an autocracy adopting a range of transnational legitimization strategies. Since the 1950s, it has been offering organized tours of China for its expatriate community and ethnic Chinese to demonstrate “the superiority of socialism” (To 2014, 159). The need to avoid being perceived as a “running-away dog” (走狗), a pejorative term suggesting a lack of imperialist powers such as the United States, is also prominent. A 2016 Ministry of Education directive stated that the country needs to “assemble the broad numbers of students abroad as a positive patriotic energy [and] build a multidimensional contact network linking home and abroad—the motherland, embassies and consulates, overseas student groups, and the broad number of students abroad—so that they fully feel that the motherland cares” (Buckley 2016b). With regard to students, the regime interlaces helpful services with pressures toward patriotism: in Germany, a 100-page brochure distributed to Chinese students of the Freie Universität Berlin offers practical information on living and studying in Germany; at same time, it states that “when we are together you can take to the streets and shout for the motherland. You can welcome Xi Dada and Peng Mama [China’s leader, Xi Jinping, and his wife, Peng Liyuan]” (Tatlow 2019). Sometimes, patriotism abroad is linked to immediate material benefits, with Chinese embassies and consulates abroad funding students’ political mobilization: when President Xi Jinping visited Washington in September 2015, hundreds of Chinese students were paid \$20 each to line the streets of Washington carrying banners and flags, in a seemingly spontaneous display of patriotism (Allen-Ebrahimian 2018).

Exile

Whoever betrays the country will pay the price. I assure you. Letting down a country, wishing harm on people, you end up suffering the negative consequences. Any person still alive who may be plotting against Rwanda, whoever they are, will pay the price . . . Whoever it is, it is a matter of time.

—Rwandan President Paul Kagame¹⁴

¹⁴ Quoted in BBC News (2014).

As Shain writes, “the home regime may impair exiles’ operational activities and undermine their claim to political legitimacy by branding them as disloyal and in effect no longer citizens” (Shain 2005, 147). In the immediate aftermath of the 1979 Iranian Revolution, Ayatollah Khomeini famously discounted the importance of an estimated two million Iranians fleeing the country: “They say there is a brain drain. Let these decayed brains flee . . . and be replaced by more appropriate brains” (quoted in Borjian 2013, 67). The Egyptian regime aims to stigmatize activists abroad: Mohamed Ali has been called a drug addict, a traitor, a womanizer, and a member of the Muslim Brotherhood, beyond being formally stripped of his Egyptian nationality; Ali claims that the regime has invited him to visit the Egyptian embassy in Madrid: “I am scared of someone being paid to murder me” (Wintour 2019). Moroccan expatriates who abstained social activities organized by the state-sponsored *Fédération des Amicales des Marocains* either expressed fear about returning home or encountered a number of difficulties by border officials in their attempts to do so (Brand 2002, 9). In 2014, Rwanda’s President Paul Kagame warned that “you cannot betray Rwanda and get away with it. There are consequences for betraying your country” (BBC 2014). He was speaking a few weeks after the body of former intelligence chief Patrick Karegeya was found, apparently murdered, in South Africa. Williams Nkurunziza, Rwanda’s high commissioner to the United Kingdom, argued that “Karegeya had become a declared enemy of the state” (BBC 2014). Over the last decade, many returnees from the Democratic Republic of the Congo face suspicion by police officers upon arrival and at times arbitrary arrest and detention, particularly with regard to “unpatriotic” activity while abroad (Alpes 2019).

In more extreme situations, exile would be imposed on political dissenters via the removal of one’s citizenship. In the context of the Cold War, this was not uncommon in the Soviet Union: Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, the Russian author of the classic *The Gulag Archipelago*, for instance, was stripped of his citizenship in 1974 and was flown to West Germany. During the Duvalier dictatorships (1957–1986), the Haitian government branded emigrants as traitors and enemies of the nation; Haitians abroad were considered to have renounced their citizenship and became stateless (Schiller and Fourn 1999). Members of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood who managed to flee Egypt in the 1950s and 1960s would also be denaturalized and forbidden from returning to the homeland (Mitchell 1969). In June 2017, Turkey threatened to strip citizenship from US-based cleric Fethullah Gülen and 129 other individuals if they do not return to Turkey within three months to face criminal investigations (Levin 2017). Tunisia under Ben Ali (Zederman 2018), as well as Qatar (Human Rights Watch 2019c) has engaged in similar practices. Post-“Arab Spring” Egypt has repeatedly banned entry to hundreds of citizens flying into the country who are suspected of political opposition activism abroad—as well as foreign researchers and journalists—while also preventing a number of Egyptians from travelling abroad (Human Rights Watch 2015). At the same time, in Bahrain, as many as 208 persons have been denaturalized and become vulnerable to deportation since 2011 (Beaugrand 2016).

Strategies of Transnational Co-Optation

Patronage

Beginning in February 2011, a number of Bahraini students studying at universities abroad had their scholarships revoked. On 27 May 2011, the [Ministry of Education] reinstated all 97 of them.

—Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry (2011)

For years, the Egyptian regime would reward select groups of its diaspora community in the United States with complimentary annual trips to the homeland,

where expatriates would meet with high-ranking political elites, while specific positions at Egyptian universities would be earmarked for high-skilled return migrants (Tsourapas 2015). Alaa Al Aswany (2008) describes the life of an Egyptian émigré in the United States, who hopes to become a prominent figure when he returns to Egypt, and so he works as a government spy. Loyal Tunisian expatriates would be praised by the homeland: in fact, the Tunisian Minister of the Interior advised Tunisians in France that “your role is to preserve this outstanding image of *Tunisiens résidents à l'étranger* and to fight with us against these intruders who are generally as useless at home as they are abroad” (Brand 2006, 112); select expatriates would be rewarded by allowing to partake in the administration of these overseas societies. The People’s Republic of China has relied on the “Thousand Grains of Sand” strategy, according to which large numbers of nationals or those of Chinese descent abroad are offered a range of benefits in order to provide intelligence in the form of micro-espionage aimed at “helping the motherland advance” (To 2014, 44–45; Bhattacharjee 2014). In 2018, Jerry Chun Shing Lee (a former CIA officer and naturalized American citizen) was discovered to have received hundreds of thousands of dollars in unexplained bank deposits, potentially in exchange for providing information to China (Goldman and Apuzzo 2018). Similarly, Morocco offers benefits to specific Moroccans abroad who hold political positions in host societies across Europe in a clientelist manner, in essence deploying them as brokers of Moroccan interests in European politics (Dalmasso et al. 2017, 3).

Kazakhstan illustrates autocracies’ use of such patronage strategies: in 1993, it developed the *Bolashak* (Kazakh for “future”) *International Scholarship* scheme through which postgraduate students are awarded the opportunity to pursue a degree program abroad. By tying migrants’ future prospects to the fate of the ruling regime, Kazakhstan minimizes political dissent abroad without using repression or legitimation: the scheme constitutes a means toward creating a young, educated elite who remains loyal to the regime, in essence treating these individuals as “clients” (Glasius 2017). It aims to articulate “a norm in which citizens are expected to have gratitude for the state’s generous giving” (Koch 2015). Marinin’s survey of 113 Kazakhs who received their education abroad finds that the “Bolashak generation” remains tightly controlled both at home and abroad (Marinin 2019). Entrance to the program is highly competitive, based on knowledge of the Kazakh language, thereby excluding ethnic Russians. The regime also avoids any risk of citizens’ time abroad affecting their social values by restricting the program to only funding postgraduate study and encouraging students on the Bolashak program to forge links with each other via Kazakh societies, and the umbrella organization KazAlliance (see Del Sordi 2018). Importantly, patronage also relies on the expectation that returning *Bolashak* graduates will go on to become a part of the country’s future elite. As one alumna of the program declared:

[When I applied, I thought] I got this chance, it will be so great. I graduate and then I will be back and be in some managing positions, just because, you know, I am an alumna. And they will get me a good job (Dalmasso et al. 2017, 6).

Blacklisting

My life in Crimea without [a Russian] passport became very difficult. I and my son became foreigners in our home city. First, we could visit only private health clinics ... Second, my son needed Russian documents to attend the school ... I could not exchange currency, apply for bank services, buy a SIM-card for my phone. I became nobody in the place where I have been living for more than 30 years.

—A Crimean who rejected Russian citizenship¹⁵

¹⁵Wrighton (2018).

Autocratic regimes may decide to discriminate against specific individuals at home and abroad, refuse them access to specific economic rewards, or label them as untrustworthy—in other words, to blacklist them. In the United Arab Emirates, relatives of political dissidents have faced restrictions on their access to any employment opportunities or higher education: “Whenever the family tried to dig deeper to understand why the government was denying access to a service or holding an application pending indefinitely,” one Emirati dissident abroad reported, “they would be told, verbally only, that the obstruction was happening at the state security level” (Human Rights Watch 2019e). In 2016, an official at the Egyptian embassy in Berlin threatened to cancel researcher Taqadum al-Khatib’s doctoral scholarship if he did not surrender his passport and grant access to his personal Facebook account (U.S. Embassy in Egypt 2017). Belarus under President Alexander Lukashenko has engaged in a range of censorship activities, including the blacklisting of Belarussian musicians abroad. In 2018, the Syrian regime passed Law No. 10, which granted all Syrians a year to prove ownership of commercial and residential property, or it would be requisitioned by the government without compensation or right to appeal (Human Rights Watch 2018b). Members of the Turkish community in Germany issued social media calls for the boycott of businesses that support the Gülen movement, back in 2016: “[w]e are outing these parallel forces and their henchmen!” read one entry that listed over twenty businesses across Stuttgart, with at least one of them denying such links (Carrel and Shalal 2016).

In the aftermath of the 1959 Cuban Revolution, around 200,000 Cubans escaped the Fidel Castro regime for the United States. In the process of the “golden exile,” named after the mainly middle- and upper-class character of those involved, the regime blacklisted these *gusanos* (“worms”) or *escoria* (“trash”), as Castro initially termed them: “those who escape their duty, taking the road to the north, have lost the right to be worthy sons of *la patria*” (Torres 2001, 51). Although the Cuban regime’s language toward émigrés softened over time, legal measures of blacklisting persisted. With Article 32 of the Cuban constitution prohibiting dual citizenship, Cubans who became naturalized in the United States lost their Cuban citizenship. At the same time, the revolutionary regime seized control of most of these individuals’ assets in Cuba via a process of expropriation, between 1959 and 1968, with the exception of small parcels of land, homes, and personal items. From 1961 onward, any Cuban leaving the country beyond a set number of days were considered to have “permanently exited” the country and had all their property confiscated. Until 2013, Cubans who filed the required papers to emigrate with the Ministry of the Interior “lost their jobs, their property was inventoried, and their children were expelled from special education programs.” Even talk of unauthorized emigration carried a six-month prison sentence (Torres 2001).

Transnational Authoritarianism and Non-State Actors Cooperation

Diasporas

The hand of the revolution can reach out to its enemies, wherever they are found.

—Iraqi President Saddam Hussein

Diaspora communities may form part of a state’s strategies of transnational authoritarianism in a variety of ways: for one, specific diaspora organizations within key host states may serve as an instrument of autocracies abroad: back in 1979, Britain withdrew its recognition of the National Union of Iraqi Students following the discovery of an internal directive asking its members to identify anti-Ba’ath activists across British universities (Makiya and al-Halil 1998, 62). In 2017, a Chinese graduating student caused a social media furor for criticizing the Chinese government in a commencement event at the University of Maryland

([Human Rights Watch 2020](#)). The Chinese Student and Scholar Association at the University of Maryland (UMD), a student organization loyal to the Communist Party operating at multiple Western universities, quickly produced a video posting pictures of blue skies in China, titled “Proud of China UMD.” CSSA members were met, and praised, by Chinese embassy staff from Washington, DC. The graduating student later apologized: “I love my country and hometown and I’m proud of its prosperity . . . I am deeply sorry and hope for forgiveness” ([Denyer and Zhang 2017](#)). A Chinese student in Vancouver argued that “[w]e self-police ourselves . . . Everybody is scared. Just this fear, I think creating the fear, it actually works” ([Human Rights Watch 2020](#)). Back in 1957, the newly independent Algerian state established the *Amicale des Algériens en France* (the Friendship Society of Algerians in France, or AAF), ostensibly an organization that represented the interests of Algerian emigrants abroad, tasked with the provision of Arabic-language classes and culture to the growing expatriate community across France ([Collyer 2006](#)). Over a number of decades, the AAF provided effective surveillance of Algerian migrants abroad, and reported directly to the Algerian Ministry of the Interior. In fact, the Algerian state expanded AAF offices across France in a cell-like structure reminiscent of strategies developed by Algerian resistance during the Algerian War of Independence ([Tsourapas 2020](#)). Mahmoud Guenez, a key actor during the War, became the AAF’s first president. Abdelkrim Gheraieb, the AAF’s second president, would boast about how he was tasked with monitoring dissent and reporting back to Algiers: “once a month, [Algerian President] Boumediene would summon me, very worried about the actions of political opponents in France” ([Beau 1995](#), 88). At some point, the AAF “reportedly sent daily detached reports to Algiers regarding developments in the community in France” ([Brand 2011](#), 5).

Multi-National Corporations

People like us don’t usually get paid. The money does not come to the person directly. It’s nothing to do with me, it’s the [North Korean recruitment] company’s business.

—A North Korean migrant construction worker in Qatar¹⁶

MNCs’ cooperation with autocratic regimes in terms of their treatment of specific individuals in their employment is also a key dimension of transnational authoritarianism ([Busse 2004](#)), particularly with regard to punishment for dissent: Cathay Pacific airlines (in which Air China has a minority stake) threatened to fire employees in Hong Kong who supported or participated in the 2019 pro-democracy protests. Chief Executive Robert Hogg argued that “Cathay Pacific Group’s operations in mainland China are key to our business . . . we must and will comply” ([BBC News 2019c](#)). In 2018, a 49-year-old social media manager working for Marriott International in the United States was fired after “liking” a Tweet praising the company for calling Tibet a country, rather than part of China. Although the employee said he was “completely unaware” of what he had done, the President and CEO of the company issued a statement of apology promising “to ensure errors like this don’t happen again, and continue to focus on making sure our Chinese guests feel respected” ([Ma 2018](#)). In other instances, MNCs offer rewards by playing a major role in global supply chains that further legitimize authoritarianism: apparel production in China and Vietnam, for instance, is dominated by MNCs that profit from poor labor standards and repressive employer actions (and recruit migrant labor from other autocracies, such as Burma or Thailand). In early 2020, China was reported to be moving thousands of Uighurs into “factory forced labor” for foreign brands ([BBC News 2020](#)). Some 3,000 North Koreans currently work in Qatar corporations, where “almost all of the wages of the workers sent abroad are

¹⁶ [Pattison \(2014\)](#).

remitted back to Kim Jong-un's regime . . . in very extreme cases, the workers are allowed to have 10 percent of their wages" (Pattison 2014). *The Washington Post* has investigated North Korea's "global moneymaking scheme" that brings in anything from \$200 million to \$2 billion a year for the regime by forcing citizens abroad to work for a fraction of their salaries: "These are married men with at least one child, even better, two children. Of course, the families are kept at home as hostages, as insurance to make sure that these workers do not defect" (Aldag 2017).

International Organizations

Putin tries to use Interpol as a weapon, to silence dissent. The government always tries to push the boundaries, sending hundreds of names to Interpol in the hope at least some will stick, like with me.

—A Russian independent journalist¹⁷

A number of IOs have cooperated with authoritarian states and have implicated themselves in the workings of transnational authoritarianism. For one, the Gulf Cooperation Council (which includes Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates) has been a key instrument for the diffusion of repressive measures, as oil-rich Arab monarchies have aimed to tackle the perceived transnational threat of the Muslim Brotherhood (Darwich 2017). The Shanghai Cooperation Organization's charter obliges a member-state to accept any terrorism accusation made by another member-state—even without any evidence—and extradite refugees or asylum seekers (Lagunina and Synovitz 2012). Beyond organizations dominated by autocracies, the International Criminal Police Organization (INTERPOL) has been abused by autocrats to pursue their opponents abroad via the issuance of "red notices" for specific individuals (Cooley and Heathershaw 2017; Lemon 2019). These warrants are shared with national police forces of all INTERPOL member states that are expected to comply via arrests and extraditions. Tajikistan has sought to capture 2,528 exiled dissidents via the use of red notices, including Muhiddin Kabiri, a key political opposition figure. Post-coup attempt, Turkey has sought 60,000 red notices against citizens abroad—more than four times the total number of notices issued by INTERPOL in 2016 (Lemon 2019). Azerbaijan, in particular, has repeatedly used the INTERPOL alert system in order to crack down on political activism abroad. After being granted political asylum in the Netherlands in 2008, journalist Fikret Hüseyinli was detained at Boryspil International Airport near Kyiv in October 2017, as he was preparing to board a flight for Germany. He was duly returned to Azerbaijan. The director of Freedom House's Eurasia programs, Marc Behrendt, argues that Interpol's alert "reflects Azerbaijan's harassment of journalists rather than any actual criminal offense" (Synovitz and Karpyak 2017).

Internet Communication Technologies

Usually when I post a photo of food or where I am [on social media], I post it after I left the place. Never when I'm still there. When I am giving a talk, I ask the organizers not to put my biography on their website . . . Because [the Iranian authorities] can use it to social engineer you and others.

—An Iranian digital activist living abroad¹⁸

Over the last few years, there has been a proliferation of the use of ICTs as an effective way of addressing autocracies' illiberal paradox. Öztürk and Taş describe

¹⁷ Lemon (2019).

¹⁸ Michaelsen (2018).

how Turkey developed a smartphone application for its German diaspora community to report potential members of the Gülen movement to Ankara (2020, 64). Persian Gulf countries, including Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates are among those that have purchased Pegasus, the Israeli-made software that allows its operator to record phone calls and intercept text messages, including those made or sent on nominally encrypted apps (Groll 2016). The Emirati messaging app ToTok, which has been downloaded millions of times since its 2019 introduction, was a spying tool (Mazzetti, Perlroth, and Bergman 2019). In 2017, the Saudi Arabian Ministry of Interior launched a new campaign, *Kulluna Amn* (“We are All Security”), which encourages Saudi citizens to report on anyone who “published terrorist or extremist ideas” at home or abroad, complete with a governmental cell phone app (Hubbard 2017). Other times, autocracies may view ICTs as a form of threat: North Korea, for instance, in 2017, has reportedly ordered overseas diplomats and workers not to go online via their smartphones, warning that anyone found doing so will be forced to return home to face “severe” punishment (Radio Free Asia 2017b). At the same time, there have been occasions in which autocracies appear to cooperate with social media companies—Saudi Arabia has been keen on shutting down critical content: Omar Abdulaziz, who was granted political asylum in Canada, created a critical Twitter hashtag about a member of the Saudi royal family, Turki al-Sheikh, #StopalSheikFromWastingTheNationsMoney. “It had 6,000 tweets in less than 15 minutes,” Abdulaziz said. “But then suddenly it was deleted from trends, like it was nothing”—Twitter never revealed why (Maza 2017). Ghanem al-Dosari, a Saudi dissident living in London, had his YouTube channel blocked—the company later revealed that it did so following an official Saudi government request (Maza 2017). Following Khashoggi’s murder, the Saudi regime reportedly employed an electronic army aiming to suppress expressions of dissent online via the targeting of both domestic and foreign audiences: lists of dissidents to target were disseminated to a “troll farm” in Riyadh, complete with daily quotas (Benner et al. 2018).

Conclusion

There were 150 of us, isolated at a hotel [for a Syrian opposition conference in Turkey]. We were the only ones there and the hotel had been sealed off for security. Still, one evening when I was on my way to my room and entered the elevator someone had scribbled “Allah, Bashar, Suriyya u bass” [God, Bashar, Syria and nothing else, a slogan used by regime supporters] on the mirror. They are everywhere.

—A Syrian living in Sweden¹⁹

“Anyone who says anything [bad] about our country, what happens to them?” Nabila Makram, Egypt’s Minister for Immigration, asked during a private party for Toronto expatriates in July 2019. “We cut,” she said as she made a throat-slitting gesture with her hand while audience members laughed and burst into applause (BBC News 2019a). Despite the rising frequency of autocracies’ extra-state repressive actions, the field of international studies lacks a coherent framework that explains how, when, and why governments engage in repressive action against their citizens beyond national borders. I drew on a range of sources in order to examine the historical evolution of the phenomenon of *transnational authoritarianism*, which involves strategies of repression, legitimation, co-optation, as well as cooperation with non-state actors. While such strategies are not novel in the context of international relations, I demonstrated how transnational authoritarianism emerged in the twentieth century as states attempt to tackle an *illiberal paradox*—namely, the need to maintain open borders for economic purposes, which clashes with their wish to continue controlling citizens’ political activity once abroad. Such extra-state

¹⁹ Quoted in Jörum (2015).

practices are bound to increase in intensity, fostered by technological change, rising global levels of cross-border mobility, as well as a growing climate of illiberalism.

While I inductively demonstrated how each type of transnational authoritarianism operates to crush dissent abroad across a range of cases from Africa, Asia, the Middle East, and South America, autocracies are not expected to limit their strategies to one type. In fact, authoritarian regimes are keen on combining these strategies, rather than using them in isolation, in order to maximize their effectiveness. Victims' reports demonstrate this all too clearly: Negar Mortazavi, an Iranian–American digital activist, has argued that strangers would approach her on Facebook by using “fake accounts that have a generic name with a generic photo or without a photo. [. . .] They tried to add us as friends with these new weird accounts and to get into our circles and monitor us” (Michaelsen 2018). In fact, the combination of different strategies produces an environment of fear that prevents exiles from escaping the long arm of their state—whether this is real or imagined. As Syrian refugees abroad would report, the Syrian regime's totalitarian-style state repression has produced “a disposition of silence . . . carried beyond the homeland” (Pearlman 2017). Transnational authoritarianism, rather than intra-state coercion, arguably provides a more apt demonstration of the repertoires of disciplinary power, akin to the workings of the Foucauldian panopticon.

I pave the way for a new research agenda on an unexplored dimension of authoritarian politics: for one, the illiberal paradox thesis suggests conflicting interests between regimes' desire for material benefits from emigration and the security needs for repression. Future research could focus on exploring potentially causal relationships between these conflicting interests—for example, primary material (such as intelligence reports or historical accounts from regime dissenters) would be helpful in demonstrating whether and when internal deliberations focused on the trade-offs between economic openness and risk to the regime. Beyond this, should we expect certain types of autocracies to develop distinct transnational authoritarian practices? Would monarchical regimes engage with political dissent abroad in different ways than personalist regimes or military juntas? How may state strength affect variation, and does this explain why some states—such as Yemen—may not engage in transnational authoritarianism? What is the importance of the country of destination's regime type in the development of autocracies' strategies?

Moving beyond autocratic politics, a key question also concerns the effects of transnational authoritarianism on liberal democracies. The American government's recent emphasis on diverting flows of highly qualified Chinese research talent to other countries in order to combat espionage has created fears of undue suspicion on immigrants with a Chinese connection (Yang 2020). In the United Kingdom, a *Foreign Affairs Committee* (2019) identified that the drive to recruit more international students led universities to be “undermined by overseas autocracies” via “financial, political, and diplomatic pressure.” At the same time, may processes of transnational repression, legitimation, and co-optation be employed in non-autocratic contexts? Israel's targeted assassination program, for instance, or extraordinary rendition policies by the United States demonstrate how a focus on extra-state repressive actions blurs the line between liberal and illiberal practices. A sustained discussion on the nature of transnational authoritarianism has the potential of revealing the wide repertoire of illiberal practices at the disposal of the modern state.

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