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CRISIS FAR-RIGHT TARIANISM ELECTIONS BELARUS MYANMAR GEORGIA POST-SOVIET AUTHORITARIANISM AUTOCRATIZATION

REGIMES

DEMOCRACY RULES-BASED GOVERNANCE REFERENDUM RUSSIA DICTATORSHIP INTERESTS POPULISM ORDER

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REGIMES

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REBUILDING THE RULES-BASED ORDER: HOW DEMOCRACIES SHOULD RESPOND

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This article examines the deepening crisis of the international rules-based order, amid the resurgence of authoritarian regimes and the weakening of multilateral institutions. It investigates the ideological foundations and structural changes in modern autocracy, the internal decline of democratic governance, and the limited enforcement power of international law. Using Ukraine's experience as a case study, it argues that democracies need to adopt strategic, proportionate, and legally grounded responses to authoritarian threats. The study suggests a three-stage framework for democratic intervention: a justification and proportionality test; highlighting targeted sanctions and legal accountability; public diplomacy as a vital tool to strengthen global stability.

Introduction

The international rules-based order, established after World War II, is facing its deepest crisis in decades, according to some scholars[1]. The erosion of international customs, the weakening of multilateral institutions such as the UN, ICC, and Red Cross, and the assertive rise of autocratic regimes, have all undermined global security. Indeed, global security is under threat; however, it was the sovereign will of states and their consensus that led to the creation of the UN in the first place, with all its competencies and, consequently, its effectiveness drawbacks. The UN members have become hostages of their own rules within the organisation.

The full-scale military aggression of the Russian Federation against Ukraine, coordinated offensive activities among states such as Russia, Iran, and North Korea, and the growing influence of populism in both developed and developing countries, reveal the fragility of democratic systems. In this context, democratic responses to authoritarian challenges must be strategic, proportionate, and legally grounded. Ukraine's experience provides an illustration of how diplomacy, legal instruments, and public communication can reinforce the rules-based international order, amidst global democratic regression.

This paper explores how democratic states can respond to the empowerment

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1 For example: 1) Michael Glennon, *The New Interventionism: The Search for a Just International Law,* Foreign Affairs, May/June 1999; 2) Ruth Wedgwood, *NATO's Campaign in Yugoslavia*, American Journal of International Law,1999; 3) Arugay, A.A., *The Rules-Based International Order Under Siege.* Asian Politics & Policy, 17: e70034, 2025, https://doi.org/10.1111/aspp.70034

of autocratic regimes, by examining three interrelated dimensions: the ideological roots of modern authoritarianism, the internal and external regression of democratic governance, and the strategic tools available for democracies to restore resilience.

The Ideological and Structural Roots of Modern Authoritarianism

The 2020s have witnessed a marked rise in the assertiveness of authoritarian regimes, posing complex challenges to the international legal order. Instances such as Russia's aggression against Ukraine, China's economic coercion, Belarus's suppression of political opposition, and North Korea's nuclear provocations illustrate the multifaceted threats these regimes present.

> **democratic responses to authoritarian challenges must be strategic, proportionate, and legally grounded**

Authoritarian regimes are not inherently illegal, nor do they automatically violate international law. However, it is generally understood that when power is concentrated in the hands of a single individual (group), the space for dissent diminishes, and as a result, the rights of people to be treated equally across different social groups are gradually neglected.

The concept of authoritarianism has evolved since Linz's 1964 definition of them as "political systems with limited, not responsible political pluralism; without elaborate and guiding ideology (but with distinctive mentalities); without intensive nor extensive political mobilisation, except at some points in their development, and in which a leader or occasionally a small group exercises power within formally ill-defined limits but actually quite predictable ones."[2] However, throughout the years, authoritarianism remained a residual category, including a variety of non-totalitarian dictatorial regimes (e.g. Singapore under the People's Action Party (PAP) dominance, and Egypt under Hosni Mubarak (1981–2011)).

Modern authoritarian regimes distinguish themselves from their predecessors through the use of controlled electoral legitimacy: rulers gain and renew mandates via elections that appear competitive, with opposition parties participating but structurally disadvantaged. Political pluralism is formally maintained through registered parties and selective media openness, allowing for limited dissent while safeguarding the ruling narrative. Coercion persists, but operates subtly, visible only during crises when state control is directly challenged. Unlike traditional military-backed regimes (e.g. Myanmar, Pakistan, Chile under Pinochet (1973–1990)), today's authoritarian governments rest on civilian dominance, with the armed forces serving as instruments rather than partners of power. Their legitimacy stems not from ideology or fear, but from a blend of performance-based governance, managed nationalism, and the illusion of choice. This adaptive model enables some of the regimes to consolidate authority without overt repression. Consequently, the line between the old democracy and new authoritarianism has become quite blurred, reshaping global political mechanisms.

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2   J.J. Linz, *An Authoritarian Regime: Spain,* [in:] E. Allardt, Y. Littunen (eds.), Cleavages, Ideologies and Party Systems: Contributions to Comparative Political Sociology, Helsinki 1964, pp. 291–341.

New authoritarianism may enjoy the support of the majority, but as long as it does not respect the rule of law, it cannot be considered a democracy, even an 'illiberal' one.[3] Understanding contemporary autocracy requires an analysis of its ideological underpinnings and structural mechanisms. The International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (Sweden) measures the following: Representation, Rights, Rule of Law, and Participation.[4] However, these categories rarely indicate the willingness of a government to improve citizens' lives; more often, they reflect cultural norms and the mechanisms leaders use to maintain control.

In 2025, North Korea is the country which shows the lowest democratic indicators, with representation at **1.8**, rights at **1.3**, rule of law at **1.3**, and participation at 0.3. Russia's scores are higher, but it is still designated as authoritarian, registering 2.8 in representation, 2.8 in rights, 2.8 in rule of law, and 2.3 in participation. China records 3.1 for both representation and rights, 3.4 for rule of law, and 2.4 for participation. Iran shows similar figures, with representation at 2.9, rights at 2.9, rule of law at 3.4, and participation at 2.9. Across all four countries, the statistics indicate consistently low democratic performance, with North Korea at the bottom and China and Iran scoring slightly higher but still within the range of authoritarian countries.[5]

To illustrate the diversity of contemporary authoritarianism, this section examines four regimes that represent distinct autocratic models — religious-theocratic (Iran), party-authoritarian (China), oligarchic-personalist (Russia), and hereditary-totalitarian (North Korea).

Case Studies of Autocratic Systems:

- **Iran** functions as an autocratic system because genuine political authority is concentrated in the hands of an unelected Supreme Leader and the bodies under his control, such as the Guardian Council and the Revolutionary Guard. These institutions can veto legislation, disqualify electoral candidates, and override the decisions of elected officials, thereby limiting meaningful political pluralism. Although the legal system is based on Shia Islamic jurisprudence, it is the *centralised and non-accountable structure of power*. While some Iranian measures may appear extreme to Western observers, they are regarded domestically as customary and legitimate. As former Supreme Leader of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Ruhollah Khomeini said: "Islam is politics, or it is nothing".[6]

- **China** enforces communist ideology through a party-led authoritarian model. Political control is reinforced by technological dominance, cyber-surveillance, and strict regulation of civil society.

- **Russia** operates as an autocratic system, because political power is concentrated in the presidency and security services, while formal institutions function largely under executive control. Although some oligarchic networks remain influential, the defining features of authoritarianism

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3   J.J. Wiatr, *New Authoritarianism: Challenges to Democracy in the 21st Century,* 2019, pp. 169–181.

4   *The Global State of Democracy 2025: Democracy on the Move,* International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, 2025, https://www.idea.int/sites/default/files/2025-09/global-state-of-democracy-2025-democracy-on-the-move_0.pdf

5   *The Global State of Democracy 2025: Democracy on the Move,* International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, 2025, https://www.idea.int/sites/default/files/2025-09/global-state-of-democracy-2025-democracy-on-the-move_0.pdf

6   Walt, Stephen M., *The Iranian Revolution.* in Revolution and War, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2013, pp. 210-268, https://doi.org/10.7591/9780801470011-006

in Russia are the systematic repression of political opposition, the criminalisation of dissent, and the widespread arrests of individuals who criticise the government or oppose the so-called 'special military operation.' Courts and legal procedures continue to exist, but the rule of law is routinely subordinated to political directives.

- **North Korea** remains an absolute autocracy, where power is concentrated in the hands of a dictator, and political legitimacy is derived from a tightly controlled narrative of national survival and historical destiny.

What these examples illustrate is that the rights and institutions recognised internationally may differ dramatically from those afforded domestically. No universally enforceable code of human rights exists. Many countries are signatories to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), its people are entitled to decent treatment under the Convention relative to the Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War (1949) and the Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms (1950)[78]; but interpretations are shaped by culture, religion, and economic realities, which in turn determine who is punished or conversely who is protected. What is craved for is just an aspiration, until there is an enforcement mechanism. For instance, expecting Iran to fully embrace liberal freedoms of religion or sexual orientation is unrealistic, given the centrality of Shia Islam to its governance identity, just as expecting France to abandon 'liberty, equality, fraternity' would be absurd.[9]

The Crisis of Democratic Governance

Democracies are not immune to regression. Internal fatigue, scepticism towards globalisation, and the distrust of elites create fertile ground for authoritarianism. Citizens who perceive the future as uncertain often withdraw from political participation, creating conditions for controlled democracy or soft dictatorship.

It should be recognised that in the modern world, we no longer encounter only what is now fashionably called *spin dictatorships* — we also face what might be termed spin democracies (e.g. Hungary under Viktor Orbán, or Azerbaijan under Ilham Aliyev). Over the next two decades, the boundary between these two models of governance is likely to become increasingly blurred.

> ❝ *Democracies are not immune to regression. Internal fatigue, scepticism towards globalisation, and the distrust of elites create fertile ground for authoritarianism*

Both spin dictatorships and spin democracies rely on a kaleidoscopic round of appeals and narratives designed to sustain public engagement. Most autocrats whose power is based on fear employ ideology as their binding force, complemented by rituals of loyalty. They insist on a singular, collective truth — one that must be accepted, and

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7   United Nations. *Geneva convention relative to the protection of civilian persons in time of war of 12 August 1949.* Treaty Series 75(973): 287–417, 1950, https://treaties.un.org/doc/Publication/UNTS/Volume%2075/v75.pdf

8   Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, 4 November 1950, Europ.T.S. No. 5; 213 U.N.T.S. 221.

9   T. Marshall, *The Power of Geography: Ten Maps That Reveal the Future of Our World*, Elliott & Thompson: London 2021, p.73.

when necessary, enforced through coercion or terror. Systems built on such foundations appear to be omnipresent yet remain inherently fragile: a single unpunished expression of dissent or 'incorrect' thought can expose a fracture in the regime's armour. The true danger lies not in the revelation of the dictator's falsehoods, but in the public confirmation of those lies without them facing any consequences — a moment that reveals weakness rather than power.[10]

> *Both spin dictatorships and spin democracies rely on a kaleidoscopic round of appeals and narratives designed to sustain public engagement*

In democracies, by contrast, the exposure of inefficiency does not signify defeat. Instead, it triggers renewal — the articulation of new goals, the presentation of new programmes, and the mobilisation of new human and material resources to achieve them. Interestingly, authoritarian leaders sometimes attempt to imitate this democratic self-correction by publicly reprimanding subordinates or staging displays of supposed internal reform. Yet, experience shows that without a genuine mechanism of accountability and consent, such imitations rarely sustain themselves beyond a few years. In the absence of coercive machinery, spin-dictators dissolve under the weight of their own artificiality.

Autocratic tendencies have been evident in certain constitutionally declared democracies. For example:

- Hungary: Constitutional amendments have curtailed judicial independence and media freedom under Prime Minister Viktor Orbán.
- Turkey: President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has used counterterrorism as a justification to purge the opposition and centralise power.
- The Philippines: President Rodrigo Duterte weakened institutions and restructured the legal framework to consolidate authority.
- Russia: Constitutional changes in 2020 allow almost indefinite presidential tenure, and override international treaties.

This demonstrates a paradox: democratic systems must maintain compromise and consensus between government, citizens, and the executive, yet modernisation and political development often threaten entrenched autocrats. Economic growth, education, and technology provide tools for citizen empowerment, but authoritarian regimes adapt to their circumstances by leveraging these same elements to consolidate power.

Technological control exemplifies this adaptation. Xi Jinping's vision of the 'Chinese Dream' binds modernisation to political authority[11]. The US 'chip choke' in 2020 highlighted the fusion of national security, digital sovereignty, and global trade. Authoritarian states weaponise technology as means for surveillance, control over supply chains, and cyber operations, extending their power without conventional military engagement.

Democratic resilience depends not only on institutions but on trust in the efficacy of political participation. Populism,

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10 S. Guriev, D. Treisman, *Spin Dictators: The Changing Face of Tyranny in the 21st Century,* Princeton University Press: Princeton, 2022, p. 128.

11 "中央网络安全和信息化领导小组第一次会议召开" [The First Meeting of the Central Network Security and Informatisation Leading Group Was Held], "中央政府门户网站" [Central Government Portal], 27.02.2014, http://www.gov.cn/ldhd/2014-02/27/content_2625036.htm

polarisation, and systemic insecurity weaken this trust, creating a psychological and social environment conducive to authoritarianism. Ukraine's defence against Russian aggression offers a counterpoint, demonstrating that motivated inhabitants, supported by robust democratic institutions, can resist autocratic encroachment, and thus uphold international law.

It is essential to understand the circumstances in which a state is regarded as posing a threat under international law. This provides the context for the concept of declarative justice, whereby legal recognition and normative authority operate in the absence of coercive measures.

Declarative Justice: Law Without Coercion

Taking into account the previous research by this article's author of the issue of international state responsibility, it is considered that any modern regime, regardless of its political nature, becomes the one posing a threat to another subject of international relations under one of three common conditions[12].

First, when it evolves into a security threat to another state or a group of states — either through the potential use of its own armed forces or by allowing foreign military formations to use its territory for manoeuvres (*security reasons*).

Second, when it achieves rapid economic growth by expanding production and exports to the point of creating unfair competition, compelling others to cut prices, seek alternative means of market influence, or resort to dumping practices; when it attracts foreign investment without establishing clear mechanisms for guaranteeing those

investments and no interest is paid to investors (economic reasons).

Third, when it begins to exert ideological or political influence beyond its borders — through propaganda, disinformation campaigns, manipulation of electoral processes, or by supporting loyal political movements abroad — thus undermining the sovereignty and internal stability of other states (*political and ideological reasons*).

> **Democratic resilience depends not only on institutions but on trust in the efficacy of political participation.**

Human rights violations are not among the common triggers for international intervention. Nevertheless, they often provoke a strong international response, expressed through declarations. This omission itself reveals an important theoretical insight: that massive or systemic human rights violations within authoritarian regimes, taken alone, rarely serve as the decisive cause for external interference or regime change. A disclaimer must therefore be made: human rights violations are not exclusive to autocracies. Even democratic systems may face isolated or structural infringements upon human rights. However, autocratic regimes are notorious for their systematic, deliberate, and prolonged breaches of fundamental human rights — often institutionalised within their political and legal frameworks.

The contemporary reality suggests that human rights have become an auxiliary precondition for interventions, rather than an independent, sufficient basis for them.

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12 Deineko, D. *Responsibility of states for breach of erga omnes obligations by omission. Accountability of Belarus for genocide of Ukrainians.* Law herald. Responsibility of states for breach of erga omnes obligations by omission, 2022, http://yurvisnyk.in.ua/v2_2022/29.pdf

Violations of human rights are often used as a rhetorical or legal justification for actions that, under international law, may otherwise constitute *wrongful acts* of states — ranging from unilateral sanctions to military interventions framed as 'humanitarian acts.'

From a legal standpoint, states and individuals can be held accountable for such violations:

- States may be brought before the *International Court of Justice (ICJ)* for breaches of international human rights treaties;
- Individual leaders may be prosecuted by the *International Criminal Court (ICC)* for crimes against humanity, genocide, or war crimes.

Human rights conventions are unique among international treaties because they establish objective standards for individual protection, not merely for reciprocal obligations between states. The protection of human rights lies at the heart *of jus cogens* — peremptory norms, from which no derogation is permitted. Therefore, a state's suspension or withdrawal from a human rights treaty cannot occur abruptly; it follows a comprehensive procedure. Such treaties are designed to ensure continuity and to prevent states from escaping accountability for violations. For instance, under Article 21 of the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (CERD), a state party's denunciation "*shall take effect one year after the date of receipt of the notification by the Secretary-General,*" preventing abrupt evasion of responsibilities. [13]

A recent example underscores this principle: in Ukraine v. Russian Federation (2024), the International Court of Justice found that Russia violated its obligations under Article 2(1)(a) and Article 5(e)(v) of CERD, through the discriminatory implementation of its educational system in occupied Crimea, particularly with respect to schooling in the Ukrainian language (para. 370)[14].

It must therefore be emphasised that the function of international law is fundamentally normative: it establishes responsibility, determines wrongful acts, and identifies individuals or states as violators. Its purpose is to recognise and declare guilt under law, not to physically enforce punishment or 'put a person behind bars' in the technical sense. This distinction is crucial to understanding both the power and the limitations of international justice, when reacting to the autocratic regime's actions.

Strategic Responses: Rethinking 'Democratic Intervention'

From the author's perspective, intervention in autocratic systems requires a careful, three-stage strategic approach — with the clear understanding that the term *Democratic Intervention* herein refers exclusively to non-military, law-based, and non-lethal instruments of influence. It presumes diplomacy over force, persuasion over coercion, and the rule of law over the rule of arms.

Therefore, two questions arise. First, should democracies intervene? The mere existence of an autocratic regime does not

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13 United Nations. *International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination.* Treaty Series, 660, 195, 1966, https://treaties.un.org/doc/Publication/UNTS/Volume%20660/volume-660-I-9464-English.pdf

14 *Case Concerning Application of the International Convention for the Suppression of the Financing of Terrorism and of the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (Ukraine v. Russian Federation),* International Court of Justice, 2017, https://www.icj-cij.org/case/166

justify external action. Democracies lack a unilateral mandate to impose political structures in a situation where international obligations are respected and domestic legitimacy exists. Intervention becomes necessary only when a regime violates international law — through aggression, systematic human rights violations, or sponsorship of terrorism.

> *The mere existence of an autocratic regime does not justify external action. Democracies lack a unilateral mandate to impose political structures in a situation where international obligations are respected and domestic legitimacy exists*

The second question is, to what extent should intervention occur? Intervention must be proportional and coordinated, balancing enforcement with the avoidance of harm to the greatest share of the labour force, not the decision-makers. History demonstrates the failure of collective sanctions, which disproportionately punish the population, while leaving the elites untouched, as seen in the cases of Lebanon and Iran. Democratic intervention should prioritise precision and enforceability.

Any external intervention in authoritarian regimes must be guided by a clear understanding of its potential consequences. Actions taken without a careful assessment of the cause-and-effect relationship between the resources used and the results achieved risk undermining long-term strategic objectives.

So How Should Democracies Intervene? On a larger scale, democratic responses to autocracy, if justified, should focus on targeted, strategic measures:

1. Personalised (smart) sanctions: Through asset freezing, travel bans, and financial restrictions directed at individuals responsible for violations. Precedents include the Saddam Hussein regime, where individual accountability proved more effective than broad embargoes.[15]

2. Sanctions on state-controlled enterprises: Limiting access to strategic materials and dual-use technologies can weaken authoritarian regimes reliant on external inputs, from imports such as military equipment or semiconductor supply chains.

3. Information and education initiatives: Soft-power campaigns can be devised to target civil society, especially young and educated populations, to foster a desire for political participation and material improvement. Unlike coercive measures, these initiatives empower citizens to advocate for accountability from within.

On the national level, conflicts are often less acute because domestic law generally lacks mechanisms for international enforcement. However, under international law, compliance with one treaty while violating another may trigger state responsibility. The principle *of lex posteriori derogat lex priori* (Article 30 of the Vienna Convention on the Law of Treaties) addresses the resolution of conflicting treaties in sequence[16]. Yet, when it was codified, the scale of multilateral treaty networks was much smaller, and it did not account for the growing complexity

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15 Resolution 1483 (2003), adopted by the UN Security Council at its 4761st meeting, 22.05.2003, para. 23, https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/495555?ln=en&v=pdf

16 *Vienna Convention on the Law of Treaties*, United Nations, 1969, https://legal.un.org/ilc/texts/instruments/english/conventions/1_1_1969.pdf

of overlapping obligations. Consequently, states cannot evade responsibility for entering into successive treaties that contradict each other.

> **" The military aggression of the Russian Federation against Ukraine, which began in 2014, has revealed both the fragility and the resilience of the rule-based international system**

A practical solution requires adherence to Article 103 of the UN Charter, which establishes the primacy of the Charter over conflicting international agreements[17]. Although Article 103 is often criticised for its limited scope — it does not fully regulate conflicts arising from multiple treaties on different subjects — it underscores the principle of hierarchy in international law. Complementary provisions exist in Article 53 of the Vienna Convention on the Law of Treaties, which codifies jus cogens norms as peremptory rules binding on all states. Respect for these norms provides a legal and moral anchor to resolve treaty conflicts and maintain coherence in international legal obligations.

The military aggression of the Russian Federation against Ukraine, which began in 2014, has revealed both the fragility and the resilience of the rule-based international system. Despite the long-standing criticism of the UN Charter's structural limitations — particularly the constraints of Articles 51 and 52 on collective defence and regional arrangements — international law remains a living mechanism of accountability rather than a powerless declaration.

Ukraine's objectives of achieving a just and lasting peace require national consolidation and interagency coordination, as well as sustained engagement with its international partners. Several of these objectives fall most directly within the operational capabilities of core state institutions responsible for foreign policy, legal affairs, and national security. De facto, actions against an authoritarian aggressor can include:

Increasing Pressure on the Aggressor. The application of diplomatic, economic, and political measures is central to constraining an authoritarian aggressor. Through coordinated efforts across the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Justice, Office of the Prosecutor General, and other relevant agencies, Ukraine can maintain and expand the system of international sanctions. Engagement in multilateral forums — including the EU, UN, OSCE, etc. — allows for the introduction of new restrictive measures, prevents their erosion, and ensures their alignment with those of partner states. Targeted personal sanctions against individuals responsible for aggression, human rights violations, or the use of propaganda, serve as a key instrument, with verified data, legal assessments, and diplomatic advocacy reinforcing their precision and legitimacy.

Pursuing Accountability for the Aggressor. Legal and diplomatic instruments converge in efforts to uphold international law and secure justice. Coordinated action among foreign policy, justice, and prosecutorial institutions allows Ukraine to support hybrid judicial mechanisms, universal jurisdiction approaches, and other legal pathways in partner countries. Such initiatives ensure that violations of international law are prosecuted, even in the face of political inertia

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17 *Charter of the United Nations,* 1945, https://www.un.org/en/about-us/un-charter/full-text

at the intergovernmental level, reaffirming the principle that impunity cannot coexist with a rules-based international order.

In rebuilding the rule-based order, democracies must strengthen mechanisms to ensure compliance, not only with individual treaties but with the overall hierarchy of international norms. This requires both legal codification and robust enforcement measures, ensuring that conflicting interests — whether economic, environmental, or security-related — do not undermine the predictability and legitimacy of international law.

Effective intervention also requires robust enforcement mechanisms. Hybrid tribunals, national courts applying universal jurisdiction, and civil society oversight can supplement intergovernmental inertia, ensuring that international law maintains both moral and practical authority. Ukraine's resistance underscores the importance of such multidimensional strategies: legal, economic, technological, and societal measures must converge, to uphold the rule-based order.

Modern technological resilience constitutes an emerging pillar of democratic strategy. Hence, democracies should reduce dependency on authoritarian suppliers in critical sectors, including semiconductors, telecommunications, and rare-earth minerals; promote cyber governance norms aligned with transparency and human rights, and foster partnerships with trusted states, to protect digital infrastructure from manipulation or coercion.

Conclusion

The increasing assertiveness of autocratic regimes in the 2020s demands a structured, strategic approach by democratic states. The framework proposed here offers responses to three questions:

1. Whether intervention is justified. Democracies should intervene only when autocracies violate international law or engage in aggression. Mere differences in the ideology of governance do not justify coercion.

2. To what extent intervention should occur. Responses must be proportional, focusing on precise instruments that avoid harming civilian populations. Emphasis ought to be on broad embargoes and indiscriminate sanctions.

3. How democracies should act. Targeted personal sanctions against elites and restrictions on state-controlled companies, complemented by information campaigns and civil-society support, provide the most efficient means of exerting influence. Reducing dependency on authoritarian states' suppliers in critical sectors, and building coalitions of like-minded states are also important.

> **Ultimately, the framework of international law underscores a critical distinction: its primary role is to define responsibility, establish norms, and declare wrongdoing, rather than to physically enforce punishment**

This approach combines strategic precision with normative legitimacy. By targeting decision-makers and systemic vulnerabilities, while empowering citizens and civil society, democracies can uphold the rule-based international order without overreach. History demonstrates that personalised measures, coordinated enforcement, and investment in social and technological resilience, offer sustainable pathways for countering autocracy.

Ultimately, the framework of international law underscores a critical distinction: its primary role is to define responsibility, establish norms, and declare wrongdoing, rather than to physically enforce punishment. This highlights both the power and inherent limitations of legal instruments in addressing modern threats posed by authoritarian and aggressive regimes.

The study of international state responsibility demonstrates that modern regimes — regardless of their political system — pose threats to other states primarily through security aggression, economic dominance, or ideological and political influence.

Ultimately, democracies should recognise that intervention is not merely a matter of ideology, but of strategic enforcement, credibility, and long-term societal impact. Ukraine's resistance exemplifies the effectiveness of coordinated, multi-layered strategies that blend legal accountability, economic pressure, and citizen empowerment. By applying these principles globally, democracies can counter authoritarian influence, reinforce international norms, and restore trust in governance — securing both national and international stability in an era defined by autocratic resurgence.

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