

In recent years Russia has developed an active strategy meant to influence public opinion and even political institutions in foreign countries. It uses a variety of subversive tactics – interfering in electoral campaigns (in the US, France, etc.), spreading fake news, deterring democracy-promotion in its “near abroad” (in Ukraine notably), manipulating extremist movements within the EU – to mention but a few. Some of the most visible techniques used by Russia, while not “hard” in the coercive sense are not really “soft” either. That is why the neologism “sharp power” was coined for labelling Russian authoritarian soft power projection.

Whereas evidence is accumulating that Russia’s sharp power has a destabilising impact beyond Russia’s traditional sphere of interests, the Kremlin’s overall intentions, and the tactics it is using on the ground to advance its geopolitical agenda inside the EU, remain understudied however. The proposed research aims to fill this gap. The objective is to identify vulnerabilities inside a representative sample of EU and candidate countries that allow Russian sharp power to impact negatively on the European democratic project itself, understood here as the integration of states sharing common democratic values. Having assessed this corrosive influence, the research will seek to clarify what are Russian ambitions. Is Russia promoting authoritarianism to shape Europe in its image? Is the Kremlin manipulating institutional weaknesses and Eurosceptic sentiments inside selected EU countries merely as a way to advance its geopolitical and business interests? Since Russian sharp power may potentially damage core European values and institutions, what counter-measures should be designed in order to enhance their resilience, in the EU and beyond?

These are topical and timely questions. Even though awareness has grown in recent years about the threat that Russia poses for democratic peace in Europe, the academic community still needs to make sense of the phenomenon, whereas the EU itself urgently needs to draft an efficient strategic response. In contributing to theory-building on the nuisance power of authoritarian regimes, while also informing decision-makers on possible counter-measures, the proposed project takes up this challenge.