Research Repository UCD

Title	Introduction: Making the World Safe for Dictatorship
Authors(s)	Dukalskis, Alexander
Publication date	2021-05-20
Publication information	Dukalskis, Alexander. “Introduction: Making the World Safe for Dictatorship.” Oxford University Press, May 20, 2021. https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780197520130.003.0001.
Publisher	Oxford University Press
Item record/more information	http://hdl.handle.net/10197/26498
Publisher's statement	This material was originally published in Making the World Safe for Dictatorship by Alexander Dukalskis, and has been reproduced by permission of Oxford University Press https://oxford.universitypressscholarship.com/view/10.1093/oso/9780197520130.001.0001/oso-97801975 For permission to reuse this material, please visit http://global.oup.com/academic/rights.
Publisher's version (DOI)	10.1093/oso/9780197520130.003.0001

Downloaded 2026-05-01 23:49:10

The UCD community has made this article openly available. Please share how this access benefits you. Your story matters! (@ucd_oa)

© Some rights reserved. For more information

This is a pre-print version of chapter 1 of the book *Making the World Safe for Dictatorship* by Alexander Dukalskis.

Please cite the original version:

Dukalskis, Alexander (2021) *Making the World Safe for Dictatorship*. New York: Oxford University Press.

1

Introduction

Making the World Safe for Dictatorship

In March 2018, Saudi women's rights activist Loujain al-Hathloul was detained by authorities in the United Arab Emirates, where she had been living. She was abducted and deported back to Saudi Arabia, where she was arrested, tortured, and threatened (Michaelson 2019). She had been an important figure advocating for an end to Saudi Arabia's ban on female driving and its system of male guardianship, which stipulates that women must have the consent of a male guardian to undertake a range of legal and administrative activities (Human Rights Watch 2016). Al-Hathloul was not the only critic of the Saudi government to be targeted outside the kingdom's borders, as the well-known murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi in Turkey and several other cases illustrate (Graham-Harrison 2018b). These actions came in the context of Mohammad bin Salman's rise to the top of Saudi politics and his determination to remake the kingdom's image. Activists and critics— even those residing abroad—were to be silenced, lest they call into question the crown prince's preferred political narrative.

In Kazakhstan's 2011 presidential election, the incumbent Nursultan Nazarbayev won, with over 95% of the vote. Nazarbayev had already been president for two decades and the outcome of this election was never in serious doubt. Shortly after that election, the Kazakh government contracted with former United Kingdom prime minister Tony Blair and a host of other foreign public relations (PR) and consulting specialists (Corporate Europe Observatory 2015). Blair spoke up publicly for Kazakhstan on several occasions, particularly if the country's human rights record came in for criticism. He especially liked to frame Kazakhstan's progress in terms of development and stability (Silverstein 2012). The country's PR consultants produced

YouTube videos highlighting Kazakhstan's development and organized and promoted international events in the country designed to bolster its prestige and present a positive image. Two PR firms apparently even changed

Wikipedia entries to portray Kazakhstan's leaders and their actions in a more favorable light (Tynan 2012).

Russia's Internet Research Agency (RIRA) came to international prominence for its attempts to influence the 2016 United States presidential election. The organization is a "troll farm" in which paid internet commentators attempt to distort online conversations, in part by posting intentionally mis- leading or distracting content. This has been going on in the domestic politics of authoritarian states for quite some time (Gunitsky 2015). While the RIRA is primarily concerned with domestic opponents, it also attempts to influence international discourse about Russia and its rivals (Chen 2015; Pomerantsev 2019, 33–40). The posts are not so much meant to bolster Russia's image or extol the virtues of its leader Vladimir Putin—although they may do that, too—but rather to distract and distort public conversations so that criticisms of Russia are relativized or buried entirely (Haynes 2018). When Russia is implicated in something harmful, such as the shooting down of Malaysian Airlines Flight 17 over Ukrainian airspace in 2014, its internet troll farms help muddy the waters of public discourse abroad so that it is more difficult to focus on Russian culpability.

In November 2018, an assistant professor at University College Dublin received an email from the Chinese embassy in Ireland inviting him on a trip to China, along with about 10 other "Irish friends," including politicians, academics, business leaders, and journalists. The idea behind the trip was "to find the achievements since China's reform and opening-up 40 years ago, and also to experience the exchanges and cooperation between Chinese mainland and Taiwan Province." Details were still being determined, the message explained, but the embassy would cover all costs, including flights and accommodation. Here was a clear effort to show China in its most positive light to a local political scientist, with the unwritten implication that he would return to teaching at the local university, commenting in media, and carrying out research with that positive experience in mind. I did not accept the invitation.

What do all these episodes have in common? Despite their apparent differences, they are each a part of what this book calls "authoritarian image management." They reveal the diversity of tactics that authoritarian governments use to influence how they are perceived abroad. Authoritarian image management is about more than just telling a good story about the country, although that is certainly a big part of it, as the Kazakh example

illustrates. It is also about cultivating specific individuals or groups to pro- mote the government's perspectives, such as when the Chinese embassy invited me to visit China.

More than just advancing flattering information about the state, it also involves trying to censor or distract from bad news about the country abroad, as the RIRA and other similar entities attempt to do. Authoritarian image management additionally involves protecting the state's

preferred image from criticism by silencing or undermining citizens critical of the government abroad, as the case of Loujain al-Hathloul illustrates. Authoritarian governments use these tactics in combination with one another to mitigate perceived threats to their security. While the tactics appear compartmentalized, thus allowing "respectable" PR firms and opinion leaders to distance themselves from torturers and murders, each tactic is an integral part of a single strategy. Autocrats try to make their world safe for dictatorship by disseminating positive messages and messengers and undermining critical messages and messengers.

Ever since Joseph Nye pioneered thinking about "soft power" in the early 1990s, observers have had a new language to understand the public relations efforts of states (Nye 1990). Tactics to enhance soft power, or the ability to achieve one's aims through attraction rather than coercion, have long been used by all states, including authoritarian ones (Nye 1990, 167). For example, the Soviet Union's early external propaganda apparatus featured carefully crafted trips for foreign visitors to show off Soviet achievements and ideology (David-Fox 2012). This sat alongside external propaganda containing mate- rial that sometimes resonated because it was accurate (such as stressing the United States' racial discrimination) or because it convincingly portrayed the Soviet experiment as exciting and successful. These strategies helped in- crease the attractiveness of the Soviet Union among a select group of Western observers and opinion leaders, particularly before Stalin's Great Terror in the late 1930s.

Concepts like soft power or public diplomacy, which entails engaging directly with foreign publics (Melissen 2005; Nye 2008), take us part of the way to understanding authoritarian image management. So do arguments that states "brand" themselves (van Ham 2002) or "frame" themselves (Jourde 2007) in particular ways to enhance their international appeal. But these concepts when applied to authoritarian states leave much to be desired. They leave out deception and the harsh—even occasionally murderous—realities of authoritarian image management.

[Page 4]

Authoritarian states engage not only in anodyne public diplomacy, branding, or framing to influence their images; they also try to police the information environment into which they disseminate their messages. Dictatorships try to eliminate or refute criticisms of their rule in the inter- national public sphere. From the state's perspective, the ideal international context would be one in which there are no serious criticisms of its political system, or prominent exiles trying to frustrate the state's latitude to do as it wishes. Sticking with the Soviet example, Moscow not only used various tac- tics associated with soft power and public diplomacy (in today's vocabulary), but also engaged in disinformation campaigns and sometimes threatened or even assassinated exiled critics of the government, the most famous of whom was Leon Trotsky, who met his end in Mexico City in 1940 at the hands of a Soviet agent wielding an ice pick.

Even in terms of communication alone, the softer concepts as applied to authoritarian states can seem naïve and incomplete. As the new concept of "sharp power" highlights, authoritarian states are not always transparent or honest about the information they produce, and sometimes they are trying to distract or discredit rather than persuade (Walker 2018; see also Michaelsen and Glasius 2018). For example, South Africa's Apartheid government undertook a multidimensional effort to burnish its image and deflect criticism around the world (Nixon 2016). This included familiar tools of soft power and public diplomacy, such as hiring PR

firms, inviting key opinion leaders on "fact finding trips" to South Africa, buying advertising space in foreign publications, and hiring spokespeople to defend the government against criticism. But it also included efforts like funding think tanks abroad to produce positive research about South Africa without making funding sources clear. The Apartheid government's information ministry attempted to secretly purchase a major American newspaper while obscuring its owner- ship through layers of financial deception. The government and its foreign spokespeople worked to discredit anti-Apartheid activists as a part of a wider communist threat amid the polarization of the Cold War. The government's efforts moved beyond standard visions of soft power or public diplomacy and embraced tactics for which those concepts are ill-suited to explain.

The concept of authoritarian image management is meant to bring the full range of tactics that authoritarian states use to bolster or protect their images abroad into the same analytical frame. It can be defined as *comprising efforts by the state or its proxies to enhance or protect the legitimacy of the state's political system for audiences outside its borders*. This includes not only the classic

strategies of external propaganda or public diplomacy, but also the extraterritorial censorship and repression meant to shape the international information environment relevant to that state's image. This book will argue that examples like the case of Loujain al-Hathloul, Kazakhstan's public relations blitz, the RIRA's foreign trolling, and my invitation to "learn" about China all reside in the same realm of comprehensibility and are options available to dictators looking to bolster their regime security by shaping their image abroad.

This book is about how authoritarian states try to cultivate a positive image of themselves abroad and attempt to protect that image from criticism. It is wide-ranging and exploratory in the sense that it discusses several cases of different sizes, political systems, and geographic locations, as well as providing cross-national data on different modalities of authoritarian image management. However, in a theoretical sense it is more tightly focused on arguing for the importance of authoritarian image management as a concept and providing tools to study it. The theoretical frameworks developed in this book can put the four vignettes presented at the outset of this book into the same analytical domain in ways that competing theories have difficulty doing.

So What, or Why Keep Reading?

Why should we care how authoritarian states try to make themselves look good abroad?[1] The most obvious answer is that it matters for the well-being and rights protections of citizens what type of political regime they inhabit. If the image management efforts of authoritarian states succeed, then it increases the likelihood that more people will live in authoritarian political systems in the future. It is already the case that more than roughly one out of every three people in the world lives in an authoritarian state (Freedom House 2019, 8), and it is worth understanding how that experience is being packaged and promoted abroad for clues about authoritarianism's appeal and power. This matters for understanding the resilience of authoritarian regimes globally. Scholars have made much progress in understanding the

[1] While recognizing that there are terminological and typological debates, this book will use the words like "dictatorship," "authoritarianism," and "autocracy" interchangeably to mean broadly non- democratic political systems. Chapter 4 and Appendix 2 discuss in more detail the inclusion/exclusion criteria for cases.

[Page 6]

international sources of authoritarian stability, and this book contributes to that tradition.

Political science scholars will benefit from having new conceptual tools to analyze the foreign policies of authoritarian states. The book will help us connect concepts like authoritarian soft power or public diplomacy to concepts like extraterritorial repression. It will also help us understand how authoritarian states influence global norms and international public discourse. The conventional wisdom for much of the 1990s and the first decade of the 2000s held that authoritarian states mimicked the norms of democracy to legitimize their rule. This entailed encouraging foreign audiences to view the state as democratic. So long as authoritarian states conform on paper to the norms of democracy, then the challenge to democratic norms is less severe. At least the rules of the game are acknowledged, even if in practice they are violated using the "menu of manipulation" (Schedler 2002) or the "autocratic menu of innovation" (Morgenbesser 2020a).

However, given the global rise of China as an unapologetically authoritarian state, the normative terrain is rapidly changing. There is no authoritarian alliance trying to make a world of dictatorships, but China is so big, politically important, and globally ambitious that political spillovers are almost unavoidable. Understanding how the international normative environment enables China's political vision, and how aggressively Beijing attempts to defend that vision, is necessary in order to grasp the political dynamics of the twenty-first century. China is not the only case analyzed in this book, but it is so important that two chapters are devoted to understanding various aspects of its authoritarian image management.

Finally, as the book's conclusion will elaborate upon, the targets of authoritarian image management efforts should care about this research. Authoritarian states try to influence policymakers, manipulate the work of journalists, and convince broader publics that their authoritarian political systems are not that bad after all. Knowing the lengths to which authoritarian regimes go in their attempts to make the world safe for dictatorship will help inform the ways in which information is produced and consumed.

Clarifying Concepts and Definitions

As the vignettes at the outset of this chapter indicate, authoritarian image management is a multidimensional concept that includes numerous kinds of

[Page 7]

behaviors. It can best be understood as an analytical framework that brings multiple related concepts into the same realm of analysis. Chapter 3 will ad- dress these issues in more detail,

but at the outset it useful to clarify that authoritarian image management efforts may include state-driven soft power and public diplomacy initiatives, foreign-facing propaganda, the cultivation of key opinion leaders overseas, extraterritorial or other types of censorship that aim to control bad news about the state abroad, and/or repression of particularly threatening messengers of critical ideas abroad. To move beyond the often-siloed analytical categories of soft power, public diplomacy, extra- territorial repression, foreign influence, and so on, an umbrella concept helps bring these activities into the same sphere of concern. Many authoritarian states do all these things to burnish and police their image abroad, so it seems unsatisfactory to examine them in isolation from one another. Doing so misses the forest for the trees. It also obscures connections between methods and the ways in which they can bolster or undermine one another.

However, as an umbrella concept, one might object that authoritarian image management risks including so much that it undermines its analytical utility. Put more bluntly, one might ask what kinds of actions do *not* count as authoritarian image management? Although there are unavoidable gray areas, the basic requirement for an action to be defined as such is that it must concern the international sphere and must relate primarily to protecting or enhancing the state's preferred political image, narrative, or perceived unassailability abroad.

Some examples may clarify the point. Authoritarian image management excludes domestic repression of citizens but includes what the state says abroad about its repression. It excludes official promotion or branding that is purely about tourism, or promoting a product or company that does not directly relate to the politics of the state. It includes repressing citizens abroad who are critical of the state or have the potential to undermine its image by virtue of their identity. But it excludes trying to arrest or repress non-political criminals abroad, fighting a rebel group in a neighboring state, assassinating a violent terrorist or rebel leader or organized crime leader abroad, or gathering intelligence on any of these. It includes trying to lobby or flatter a foreign decision-maker or opinion shaper so that s/he views the state more positively, but it excludes cases in which an opinion leader views that state positively on his/her own terms without influence by the state. It includes external media outlets owned and/or editorially controlled by the state, but excludes media outlets editorially independent of the government.

[Page 8]

It includes a government trying to coerce a foreign company to adopt or renounce a political stance under threat of losing market access, but it excludes that same government denying market access to a company for a host of other non-political or regulatory reasons. Obviously, there are borderline areas and cases in all these domains, but at their root, authoritarian image management activities should be state-directed and connected to enhancing a dictatorship's image or protecting it from criticism abroad.

Clarifications and Caveats

All research efforts are limited in what they can explain. It is worthwhile to be transparent about these so that the reader knows what to expect. For this book, three clarifications should be acknowledged at the outset.

First, the book does not address the image management efforts of democracies. This is not to say that democratic states do not care about their images; far from it. Democracies engage in public diplomacy, hire public relations firms, and are worried if they have a negative image abroad. Particularly during the Cold War, for example, the United States undertook a multi-dimensional effort to make its political system look positive to foreign audiences (Parker 2016). The practices and innovations of authoritarian states designed to erode accountability often find counterparts in democratic states (Glasius 2018a; Morgenbesser 2020a). However, as Chapter 2 will make clear, in today's world, authoritarian states have extra incentives to engage in image management. Rhetorically at least, democracy is still a preferred global norm, and so the case for authoritarian norms is a defensive one at minimum and an insurgent one at most. Making the world safe for dictatorship is an existential endeavor for leaders of authoritarian regimes.

Furthermore, the tactics of authoritarian regimes are likely to differ. Most contemporary democracies are more restrained in what they can and will do in this realm. For example, with a few notable exceptions, today's democracies generally do not threaten or assassinate their exiled critics. This is primarily because they have fewer exiles to begin with, but also because citizens in democratic states can generally already criticize their governments without fear of reprisal. Free speech protections in consolidated democracies mean that governments have less control over the type of information that can be reported about them in the global public sphere. The point here is not that

democracies are perfect or that they do not try to manipulate their image, but rather that the dynamics of image management differ between democracies and non-democracies. The latter is interesting and important enough to de- serve its own book.

Second, a persistent question is how effective the methods of authoritarian image management are. It is difficult to answer this question in the vocabulary of causal effect size. This book does not approach the question with the aim to understand whether the world is x% safer or less safe for dictator- ship. Rather, it focuses on process. As Chapter 3 will explain, there are clear causal mechanisms that undergird the various tactics of authoritarian image management. This means that "success" needs to be thought of as context- dependent given the tactic in question. From a big-picture perspective, one could construct global measurements and use proxy data to test the success of authoritarian image management. However, the topic would first benefit from more conceptual development and exploration of causal mechanisms.

Third, studying authoritarian regimes necessarily entails data limitations. They are secretive by nature, and so scholars of dictatorship often must find creative ways to gather the data they need to substantiate arguments. Obscuring information is a feature of authoritarian systems, not a bug. Overcoming the challenge is made more severe when studying the actions that authoritarian states have special incentive to hide. Some dimensions of authoritarian image management fit this precise category. Extraterritorial repression, for example, or covertly influencing a key decision-maker, are actions that are usually not designed to be public. This challenge is inherent, which means that it is undoubtedly the case that the data in this book are incomplete. It is hoped that this limitation is mitigated by bringing different kinds of data from different angles to the question. Indeed, because authoritarian image management is characterized by diverse tactics, multidimensional data are necessary to begin to understand it.

At various points, the book uses interviews conducted by the author, a cross-national events database built from public media and nongovernmental organization (NGO) sources, corporate documents registered with the US federal government, primary government documents and speeches by political leaders of authoritarian states, analysis of foreign-facing propaganda, media frequency analysis, and process tracing using secondary sources. The aim is to foster a well-rounded understanding of authoritarian image management, however imperfect the data may be.

[Page 10]

Chapter Preview

The remainder of this book is organized in eight subsequent chapters. Chapter 2 builds the theoretical foundation to understand authoritarian image management. Scholarship on authoritarian legitimation and on autocracy promotion both suggest that authoritarian image management is important to analyze. The bulk of the chapter addresses the motivations to engage in authoritarian image management and argues, drawing on Owen (2010), that authoritarian states do so for both internal security (to bolster their domestic rule) and external security (to help build a friendlier international environment for their policies). In doing so, it argues that authoritarian states in the post–Cold War era have special incentives to manage their image abroad given the predominance of democracy as an international norm.

How exactly do authoritarian states manage their image abroad, and what are the causal chains linking their activities to their desired outcomes of in- ternal/external security? Chapter 3 proposes four sets of mechanisms to ex- plain how authoritarian image management is meant to have tangible effects for states. The framework categorizes specific methods (i.e., external propaganda or silencing exiles) into higher-order groupings of mechanisms organized by their form and intended audience. The idea is to create a framework that can facilitate case study and comparative causal analysis across a range of contexts. The framework captures the sorts of activities described in the four vignettes presented at the outset of this book, tracing out their intended causal processes.

Chapter 4 takes a "big picture" view by presenting cross-national data on two empirical manifestations of authoritarian image management. First, using filings with the US Department of Justice, it presents descriptive in- formation on the scope of publicly available lobbying and public relations outlays by authoritarian states in the United States. Second, it presents the Authoritarian Actions Abroad Database (AAAD), which documents publicly available cases in which authoritarian states coerce their exiled critics and citizens. There are nearly 1,200 instances presented between 1991 and 2019 in the AAAD, ranging from vague threats to assassinations. The data presented are descriptive and can assist other researchers in (1) selecting cases for analysis, and (2) situating detailed analysis in a larger universe of processes and institutions. This chapter is a first step in coming to terms with the magnitude of authoritarian image management.

[Page 11]

As the largest and most powerful authoritarian state in today's world, China deserves a particularly close look and therefore will be discussed in two chapters. Chapter 5 focuses on how Chinese authorities attempt to control the information that leaves China and enters the international media. The analysis draws on semi-structured interviews with current and former foreign correspondents in China. The interviews reveal the techniques that the government uses to try to limit negative news about China reaching global audiences. These include direct persuasion, restricting sites and/or persons from being investigated, surveillance, intimidation, and the specter of visa non-renewal. Examining how foreign correspondents are "man- aged" in China is important because controlling what information leaves China in independent outlets is foundational to China's other efforts at image management.

Chapter 6 turns to Beijing's more direct attempts to promote itself and protect its image abroad. The chapter discusses four main areas, each corresponding to one of the mechanisms developed in Chapter 3. It analyzes the Chinese government's ideological vision, its efforts to cultivate journalists from the developing world to tell China's story, its propaganda campaign in response to criticism of its repressive Xinjiang policies after 2014, and its targeting of exiles. Data are drawn from publicly available documents and speeches, global media frequency analysis, video from China's main external propaganda television station, interviews with journalists, and secondary literature.

Chapter 7 turns its attention to Rwanda. It was selected because, unlike China, it is a small regional power, but it has also developed a sustained and sophisticated authoritarian image management strategy. Rwanda's dependence on foreign aid from mostly democratic states means that the government has clear incentives to present itself as a democratic and technically competent government. Rwandan president Paul Kagame has ruled the country for more than two decades. During his time in power, Kagame has suppressed dissent and has warped the institutions of democracy. However, he has also gained praise on performance grounds, as there has not been a return to widespread political violence domestically, the economy has grown rapidly, and female rates of participation in the legislature are among the highest in the world. The Kagame government therefore has the mate- rial to tell a good story, and it has done so with vigor. This chapter covers the government's image management efforts abroad to be seen as a success story and as a regional leader. To protect this image, the government engages

[Page 12]

in obstructive techniques ranging from impugning the credibility of its critics, restricting access to academics and journalists, obscuring its role in supporting militias in neighboring Congo, and threatening or even assassinating critical dissidents abroad. The chapter uses secondary literature and publicly available documents to paint a picture of an authoritarian regime that pays close attention to how it is perceived abroad and has succeeded in mitigating pressure to democratize.

Chapter 8 focuses on North Korea (or the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, the DPRK). North Korea was chosen as a case for analysis because its image management is more limited in scope and aspiration than a glob- ally ambitious great power like China and has had different outcomes than a regional power in a different context like Rwanda. North Korea is often seen as an anachronistic dictatorship—a relic from the Cold War. And yet, its political system has survived far longer than skeptical observers anticipated. North Korea became even more inward-looking as the global communist movement essentially vanished, but it has nonetheless

maintained a carefully considered image management strategy. Analyzing it can illuminate how authoritarian image management can function as a strategy of relatively small, ideologically defensive states and thus help demonstrate the generalizability of the concept. After a historical overview, the chapter focuses on two aspects of the DPRK's authoritarian image management: its efforts to make North Korea appealing to the Korean minority in Japan, and its network of supportive "friendship" groups around the world. This approach gives a detailed look at authoritarian image management in both a specific context and more diffuse sense.

Finally, Chapter 9 offers concluding remarks. The study of authoritarian politics is usually—and understandably—focused on the domestic realm. It often incorporates international forces by considering how they act on domestic processes. This book reverses that optic by considering how authoritarian states shape the idea and image of authoritarian political systems abroad. The concluding chapter elaborates on the implications of this perspective, suggests productive lines of academic inquiry, and sketches some recommendations for citizens and policymakers.