

# The peculiar practices of 'authoritarian emigration states'

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# The peculiar practices of ‘authoritarian emigration states’

*Gerasimos Tsourapas* alerts us to how non-democratic states behave towards their own citizens living abroad.



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## A phenomenon on the rise

The attempted murder of Russian former military intelligence officer Sergei Skripal and his daughter in Salisbury on 4 March 2018 brings to light an under-explored dimension of world politics, namely non-democracies’ outreach to citizens beyond their territorial borders. The workings of *authoritarian emigration states* are not unknown to Western liberal democracies – Russia under Vladimir Putin appears implicated not only in the case of the Skripal family, but also in the 2013 death of political exile Boris Berezovsky, and the 2006 poisoning of former secret service agent Alexander Litvinenko by radioactive polonium-210. In France and Belgium, Tunisian and Moroccan embassies have carefully monitored the activities of their expatriate communities and report any suspicious activity to their governments back home since the 1960s. Other states’ engagement with emigration seems to fly under the radar but remains undoubtedly political: aiming to project a ‘Turkish Islam abroad’, Ankara now dispatches religious scholars via the Directorate of Religious Affairs, or the *Dinayet*, to some 2,000 mosques abroad each year. Since the 1959 Cuban Revolution, Havana has offered paid opportunities for its medical professionals – physicians, dentists, nurses – to work across Latin America, the Middle East,

and sub-Saharan Africa. As authoritarian states devise new modes of projecting power abroad via emigration, two questions emerge: why do such practices appear to be part and parcel of everyday politics around the world, and how can we make sense of them?

Part of the answer to the rise of authoritarian emigration states lies in the changes brought about by globalisation. A range of forces contribute to the rise of cross-border mobility, from decreasing transportation costs to global economic interdependence or, merely, the pursuit of a better future beyond one’s own country. As the economies of democracies and non-democracies alike become more outward-facing, networks of people create connections across sending, transit, and host states. In this sense, authoritarian states attempt to reach out beyond their territorial borders just as democracies themselves do: many countries now offer state-sponsored celebrations or language lessons for expatriates’ families, while others have extended voting rights to citizens living abroad. Given the growing number of French citizens living abroad, for instance, the French government has allowed expatriates to elect their own representatives to the National Assembly since 2010. In fact, partly as a result of global interconnectedness, a growing number of states develop institutions that specifically target their ‘diasporas’ – a complex term that may refer to a state’s citizens abroad and their descendants, but also to broader groups of people that maintain a sense of connection to a homeland, be it real or imagined.

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### Contending with the 'illiberal paradox'

Yet, globalisation only partly explains the rise of authoritarian emigration states. What has changed over time, is non-democracies' attitude towards cross-border mobility, and the decision to embrace their citizens' emigration as an asset rather than a liability. Historically, restricting emigration was the norm rather than the exception for the vast majority of authoritarian states that were eager to maintain full control over their citizens. The apprehension with which non-democracies approached emigration is best exemplified in the German Democratic Republic's 1961 decision to construct the Berlin Wall, thereby putting an end to massive emigration and defection into West Germany. Similar restrictions to cross-border mobility existed across the Middle East, Africa, Eastern Europe, and Asia, as well as in Latin America. For much of the 20th century, Soviet citizens seeking to emigrate had to go through cumbersome processes to secure an exit visa. The majority of applicants were refused such permission and were labelled as 'refuseniks', subject to constant harassment and varied forms of discrimination. In Cuba, simply talking about unauthorised travel abroad carried a six-month prison sentence until 2013. To grant freedom of movement to all citizens was a political risk that authoritarian states were not willing to take.

Even today, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea considers unauthorised emigration a form of defection and pursues a 'shoot to kill' policy for citizens attempting to cross its borders. Surviving would-be migrants face torture and forced labour in 're-education camps'.

Gradually, however, most authoritarian states came to realise that the political benefits of maintaining tight control over their citizens comes at a high price. Strict border controls constituted an increasingly costly process that prevented access to the material benefits of emigration, including education and training opportunities abroad, the easing of unemployment pressures and, most immediately, access to migrants' remittances in the form of money and care packages dispatched to family members left behind. Therein lies the *illiberal paradox* of authoritarian emigration states: on the one hand, non-democracies seek to restrict emigration for political and security reasons in order to suppress dissent and ensure control over their citizens' lives as thoroughly as possible; on the other hand, they wish to encourage emigration for economic reasons in order to attract remittances and other material benefits associated with cross-border mobility.

As many authoritarian states eased emigration controls over the latter half of the 20th century, it seemed



A 'hazardous materials' team prepares to investigate the home of assassination target Sergei Skripal. This incident in March 2018 represents an extreme example of how authoritarian emigration states deal with their citizens who live abroad.

PHOTO: PETER NICHOLLS/REUTERS.

that economic needs had marginalised any political concerns: from the 1970s onwards, oil-rich countries in the Middle East – such as Libya and Saudi Arabia – started encouraging student emigration to Western Europe and North America. There was a distinct material rationale behind this, as governments were hoping that such forms of mobility would lead to the development of a local, educated elite. Poorer Arab states, such as Egypt, Tunisia, and Morocco lifted all restrictions to emigration in the hope of increasing the influx of capital inflows via remittances, as millions of workers flocked to Europe and the Gulf states. In the People's Republic of China, Deng Xiaoping's espousal of economic liberalisation in the 1970s led to the embrace of labour emigration as part and parcel of the state's developmental strategy. In Europe, Turkish workers profited from labour agreements between Ankara and various European states to resettle in West Germany, the Netherlands, and elsewhere as guest workers, or 'Gastarbeiter', until the early 1970s.

### Projecting authoritarianism abroad: hard and soft power dynamics

Did the liberalisation of emigration contribute to the weakening of non-democratic rule? Not quite. Authoritarian emigration states resolved the illiberal paradox not by abandoning their goal of political control, but by developing complex forms of transnational authoritarianism. One type of transnational authoritarianism is the use of aggression, or hard power, towards a state's migrant and diaspora communities: targeted assassinations of Russian political defectors abroad, for instance, is one such example. In September 2017, the murder of Syrian opposition activist Orouba Barakat and her journalist daughter in Istanbul was attributed to the long arm of the Assad regime. Under the rule of Colonel Gaddafi in Libya, a political envoy in London named Musa Kusa was tasked with identifying and eliminating Libyan opposition figures in the United Kingdom – Kusa's zeal earned him the nickname *mab'ūth al-marwt* ('the envoy of death'). Such forms of projecting hard power abroad, or what academic Dana Moss terms 'transnational repression', also include the surveillance of migrants' activity abroad, forced extradition requests or, in more extreme cases, migrants' de-nationalisation: Tunisia has, at multiple times over the years, stripped political dissenters – particularly members of the Islamist Ennahda Movement – of their citizenship while abroad, barring them from returning to the country. Often, therefore, an authoritarian state does not relinquish control over their citizens' lives once they have emigrated; it merely revises the ways it exerts power over them.

But transnational authoritarianism does not necessarily involve acts of aggression or violence, for it may also attempt to use migrant communities as an instrument of co-optation or, according to Joseph Nye's term, 'soft power'. The rise of China as a global power cannot be disassociated from '*wenhua ruan shili*', or the cultural soft power it pursues in a number of ways, including

the dispatch of Chinese teachers to over 500 Confucius Institutes across the world. Under Fidel Castro, Cuba's 'medical internationalism' project tasked medical professionals with carrying the torch of the revolution in other parts of the Global South. In the Middle East, Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser developed an extensive programme of dispatching thousands of Egyptian teachers across the Arab world, aiming to spread ideas of anti-colonialism, anti-Zionism, and Arab unity. More recently, the Iranian-Saudi competition over regional hegemony also includes a transnational dimension of efforts at exerting religious influence beyond the two states' borders, in a manner reminiscent of Turkey's ongoing *Dinayet* practices. These practices suggest a less harsh type of transnational authoritarianism: in addition to extending control over potential political dissenters beyond their territorial borders, authoritarian emigration states employ loyal subjects abroad for soft power purposes.

### Authoritarian power beyond state borders

What will the impact of authoritarian emigration states be in the future? The attempted assassination of Sergei Skripal in March 2018 has highlighted the extent to which the rise of international migration has affected the workings of authoritarianism in world politics. But beyond a novel set of practices aimed at the projection of hard and soft power abroad, we can see how authoritarian emigration states are learning from each other's practices as they continue to develop novel forms of projecting power beyond their borders. In fact, a degree of policy diffusion is evident. Russian strategies aimed at deterring dissent in the diaspora appear to expand upon mechanisms that have already been employed by the Libyan state in the past. And, beyond the use of coercion, Chinese soft power strategies abroad build on lessons learned from similar practices by Egyptian and Cuban elites.

At the same time, a rising question remains unanswered, namely how should liberal democratic states and their citizens respond to the peculiar practices of authoritarian emigration states? Do liberal democracies choose tight border controls and embrace illiberal policies – as when the Netherlands barred Turkish ministers from speaking at political rallies in Rotterdam in March 2017? Others have suggested that liberal democracies need to re-evaluate their foreign policy – in Britain, some demand an examination of our relationship with Moscow, as they had also done with regard to London's ties with the Gaddafi regime in the past. Regardless of immediate policy responses, the emergence and empowerment of authoritarian emigration states contributes to new forms of everyday politics around the world that we are only now beginning to comprehend. ■

Dr Gerasimos Tsourapas holds a British Academy/Leverhulme Small Research Grant in order to conduct research on the politics of forced migration in the Mediterranean.