YSU Journal of International Affairs
2026, Vol. 2, No. 2, 101-122
https://doi.org/10.46991/jia.2026.2.2.101

YEREVAN STATE UNIVERSITY PUBLISHING HOUSE

THE CONCEPT OF SHARP POWER IN THE SOUTH CAUCASUS: BEYOND THE AUTOCRACY–DEMOCRACY DIVIDE

ARA POGHOSYAN[*]
PhD Candidate, Public Administration Academy of the Republic of Armenia, Armenia
NORAYR DUNAMALYAN[**]
PhD in Political Science, Associate Professor, Russian-Armenian University, Armenia

Abstract

This article examines power in international relations through realist constructivism, focusing on conceptual boundaries between soft, smart, hard, and sharp power. While sharp power has often been associated with authoritarian regimes, this article questions whether regime type alone suffices to identify and explain its use. It argues that sharp power should instead be assessed through the contexts of informational influence, particularly where manipulation, concealment, or the exploitation of informational and institutional vulnerabilities may undermine autonomous political judgment. Such influence remains defensive sharp power unless it evolves into offensive sharp power, which seeks to undermine a target state's internal stability and influence its decision-making through disinformation, cyberattacks, the deliberate exacerbation of internal divisions, and manipulation disguised as soft-power initiatives. The article applies this framework to a comparative analysis of Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia, examining how their geopolitical positions and domestic political environments shape their approaches to information, strategic communication, and external influence. It considers the relationship between institutional trust, media environments, and information vulnerability, proposing an exploratory framework for assessing these factors. The article contributes to debates on sharp power by offering a differentiated framework for analyzing informational influence in the geopolitically contested South Caucasus.

Keywords: *sharp power, hard power, soft power, smart power, defensive sharp power, offensive sharp power.*

[*] Ara Poghosyan is a PhD candidate at the Public Administration Academy of the Republic of Armenia and a Senior Researcher at the Armeniakan Center for Strategic Studies. His research focuses on Middle Eastern geopolitics, national power, and regional security dynamics.
Email: arapoghosyan@paara.am **ORCID iD:** 0009-0008-1385-5346
[**] Norayr Dunamalyan holds a PhD in Political Science and is an Associate Professor at the Department of Political Science, Russian-Armenian University. His research focuses on political identity, historical memory, nation-building, and political transformations in Armenia and the post-Soviet region.
Email: norayr.dunamalyan@rau.am **ORCID iD:** 0000-0003-0239-0594

Received: 29.06.2026
Revised: 17.09.2026
Accepted: 18.10.2026

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Introduction

Although conventional constructivism often emphasizes the role of transnational norms and universal morality,[1] this study relies on the realist-constructivist approach put forward by Jennifer Sterling-Folker.[2] Accordingly, power is understood as a combination of material and non-material resources, including morality and ideology, that contribute to state survival and internal cohesion within an anarchic international system shaped by the balance of power.

Drawing on various theories of power, the article proposes a functional model that makes Walker and Ludwig's regime-centric conceptualization of sharp power more measurable and objective by defining it by its intended purpose and operational nature rather than by the state's political regime. The crisis of the global order and power transitions compel a reassessment of classical power concepts and their application by modern states.[3] Competition between democratic and authoritarian states has, in turn, led to an erosion of power concepts, giving rise to issues that demand in-depth study.[4] Specifically, the use of soft power resources, as an acceptable form of influence and interaction among states, can be associated with practices whose goal is to carry out disruptive activities disguised as soft power initiatives.[5]

Walker and Ludwig termed this form of influence "sharp power."[6] Although they characterized sharp power as an influence deployed by authoritarian states, in the context of global ideational and cultural transformations, we argue that sharp power can be exerted regardless of whether a state is authoritarian or non-authoritarian. As a result, states, regardless of regime type, use sharp power tools; however, in democratic systems, their use is statistically linked to a decline in institutional trust. This circumstance also reflects the increasingly blurred boundaries between foreign and domestic policy, a development that affects the effectiveness of the soft power toolkit.

The central argument of this article is that the conventional association of sharp power with authoritarian regimes, although analytically useful, risks obscuring the complex relationship between political systems and the practices of informational influence. Regime type alone cannot establish whether a particular instrument of influence constitutes sharp power; nor does the pursuit of geopolitical interests automatically transform public diplomacy, strategic communication, or

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[1] Alexander Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 135.
[2] Jennifer Sterling-Folker, "Realist-Constructivism and Morality," *International Studies Review* 6, no. 2 (2004): 341–43, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1521-9488.2004.419_3.x.
[3] A. F. K. Organski and Jacek Kugler, *The War Ledger* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980).
[4] Henry Farrell and Abraham L. Newman, "Weaponized Interdependence: How Global Economic Networks Shape State Coercion," *International Security* 44, no. 1 (2019): 42–79, https://doi.org/10.1162/isec_a_00351.
[5] Joseph S. Nye Jr., "How Sharp Power Threatens Soft Power: The Right and Wrong Ways to Respond to Authoritarian Influence," *Foreign Affairs*, January 24, 2018, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2018-01-24/how-sharp-power-threatens-soft-power.
[6] National Endowment for Democracy, *Sharp Power: Rising Authoritarian Influence* (Washington, DC: National Endowment for Democracy, 2017), https://www.ned.org/sharp-power-rising-authoritarian-influence-forum-report/.

political persuasion into sharp power. The decisive distinction lies in the mechanisms through which influence is exercised: whether it relies on open persuasion and voluntary attraction or on manipulation, concealment, and the exploitation of informational and institutional vulnerabilities in ways that may distort the target's autonomous political judgment. This distinction is particularly important in the South Caucasus, where Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia operate within an intensely contested geopolitical environment shaped by competing external actors, divergent political trajectories, and struggles over political narratives and international legitimacy. By comparing these three cases, the article examines whether the analytical boundaries between soft, smart, and sharp power remain meaningful across different political contexts and whether sharp power can be adequately understood through a binary opposition between autocracy and democracy. It argues that a mechanism-based and context-sensitive approach offers a more precise framework for identifying and comparing contemporary practices of informational influence.

Classical and Contemporary Concepts of Power

In international relations (IR) theory, the definition and role of power lie at the core of fundamental scholarly debates. Technological advancements and the emergence of the information society have prompted a reexamination of classical, material views of power, encouraging greater attention to its more flexible, non-material manifestations.

In classical IR theories, particularly within realism and neorealism (H. Morgenthau, K. Waltz, J. Mearsheimer), power is often assessed in terms of a state's material capabilities (military and economic strength).[7] In this context, hard power refers to the ability to alter the behavior of actors through direct coercion, threats, or material incentives. As Dahl classically put it, "A has power over B to the extent that he can get B to do something that B would not otherwise do."[8] Although hard power continues to be the cornerstone of state security, in the information age, material factors alone cannot explain the full dynamics of international influence.

In contrast to hard power and coercion, Joseph S. Nye defines soft power as the ability to attract others and shape their preferences through the appeal of one's values, culture, and foreign policy without relying on direct force or economic dependence.[9] Soft power highlights culture (both its material and non-material components), a consistent foreign policy image, and the presence of moral principles and values in international relations as its primary tools of influence. At the same

[7] Hans J. Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*, 5th ed. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1978); Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1979); John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2001).

[8] Robert A. Dahl, "The Concept of Power," *Behavioral Science* 2, no. 3 (1957): 202–3, https://doi.org/10.1002/bs.3830020303.

[9] Joseph S. Nye Jr., *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2004), 5–11.

time, soft power operates both between and within states, influencing the formation of preferences in both contexts.[10]

Because relying solely on a soft or hard toolkit often leads to foreign policy failures in practice, the concept of smart power emerged.[11] It involves a strategic and dynamic combination of hard and soft power tools, in which military strength and diplomacy complement each other to enhance foreign policy effectiveness. The concept of smart power offers a more integrated understanding of international influence by combining different instruments of power. However, shifts in the global order and the emergence of new arenas of geopolitical competition, including cyberspace, biopolitics, and identity politics, have created greater opportunities for covert and manipulative forms of influence.

The intensity of sharp power deployment, meanwhile, depends on geopolitical competition and the vulnerability of the information environment. Furthermore, greater secrecy surrounding sharp power operations amplifies their destructive consequences for the information environment and related domains. In practice, sharp power can involve spreading disinformation, creating fake agendas, provoking internal divisions, using covert networks and agents of influence, and undermining institutional trust in target societies.[12] In general, both authoritarian and democratic regimes can employ such measures, with various justifications for policies directed at external and internal audiences. Thus, sharp power does not seek to attract or persuade; it aims to manipulate the perceptions of the target state's domestic audience (and in some cases, its own) and disrupt its decision-making system. A comparative analysis of these forms of power demonstrates a dynamic shift in "influence-response" relations, which evolve alongside broader developments in international relations (Table 1). For this reason, the modern understanding of power requires a comprehensive approach in which traditional military-political strength must be coupled with effective defensive and countermeasure mechanisms in the information-psychological domain.

Table 1. Comparative Overview of Power Concepts

Power Type	Main Instruments	Nature of Impact	Objective
Hard Power	Military power, economic sanctions	Coercion, compulsion	Forced behavioral change
Soft Power	Culture, values, diplomacy	Attraction, persuasion	Agenda-setting, creation of sympathy
Smart Power	Synergy of hard and soft instruments	Strategic combination	Effective realization of foreign policy goals
Sharp Power	Disinformation, censorship, sabotage	Manipulation, penetration	Internal weakening of the target society

[10] Edmarverson A. Santos, "The Concept of Soft Power in International Relations," *Diplomacy and Law*, November 30, 2023, https://www.diplomacyandlaw.com/post/the-concept-of-soft-power-in-international-relations.
[11] Nye, *Soft Power*, x.
[12] Christopher Walker, "What Is 'Sharp Power'?" *Journal of Democracy* 29, no. 3 (2018): 9–23, https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/articles/what-is-sharp-power/.

Although information influence, propaganda, and psychological operations have deep historical roots (having been actively employed during the Cold War by both Western and Soviet actors, including covert intelligence operations and ideological campaigns), the conceptual distinctiveness of contemporary sharp power lies not in the novelty of its manipulative instruments, but in its targeted mechanics and operational nature. Unlike classical soft power, which aims to build long-term attractiveness and open dialogue based on shared values, sharp power is directed at the penetration and internal erosion of a target society's information space. One of its distinguishing features is the secrecy surrounding its true sources of funding and the identities of its agents of influence, who may operate through seemingly independent institutions.

At the same time, it is necessary to distinguish sharp power from hybrid[13] or information[14] warfare. Although they have some similarities, hybrid and information warfare often pursue explicit military or geopolitical objectives and may include elements of hard power, while sharp power operates primarily in the non-military domain, aiming to exploit the institutional weaknesses of an adversary or ally and the openness of its society without the direct use of physical aggression. Information and hybrid warfare may also incorporate sharp power as part of a broader strategy. In this case, the aim is to undermine target societies, their state and social institutions, and public trust in the authorities through sharp penetration, potentially alongside other tools of hybrid or information warfare as part of a broader strategy.

The paradox of sharp power deployment by democratic regimes (as evidenced by defensive economic pressures, covert digital networks, or geopolitical campaigns) lies in the fact that democracies instrumentalize their own open institutions (media, NGOs, digital algorithms) in foreign policy. This blurs the boundary between domestic and foreign policies, fundamentally distinguishing these practices from classical soft power and shifting them into the realm of covert coercion.

The Use of Sharp Power by Democratic States

Although Walker and Ludwig introduced the concept of sharp power in relation to authoritarian regimes, there is a conceptual limitation in this approach. The authors note that authoritarian states use economic activity to advance political goals in the ideological domain. However, economic coercion is a manifestation of hard power, and democratic states also actively resort to such methods. Disinformation techniques are global in nature, but their purposes differ depending on the political system: in democratic countries (for example, the United Kingdom, the United States,

[13] Frank G. Hoffman, *Conflict in the 21st Century: The Rise of Hybrid Wars* (Arlington, VA: Potomac Institute for Policy Studies, 2007), https://www.potomacinstitute.org/images/stories/publications/potomac_hybridwar_0108.pdf.

[14] Robert Białoskórski, "The Theoretical Concept of Information Warfare: A General Outline," *Humanities and Social Sciences* 30, no. 4, part 1 (2023): 7–24, https://doi.org/10.7862/rz.2023.hss.39.

and Poland), they can be used in political struggles, with potential strategic geopolitical consequences and implications for the stability of the international order.[15]

A notable example is the covert creation of ZunZuneo (the so-called "Cuban Twitter") in Cuba by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID).[16] The purpose of this project initially was to attract young users with nonpolitical content, such as sports and music. Subsequently, it entailed introducing political messages intended to encourage anti-government mobilization. France, while publicly presenting itself as a defender of democracy and human rights, has for decades maintained extensive political and economic influence in West and Central Africa. This influence has operated through arrangements such as the CFA franc monetary system and political support for pro-French elites, raising concerns about local sovereignty and the persistence of neocolonial relationships.[17]

Furthermore, contemporary international relations are marked by perceived double standards: while officially declaring adherence to human rights and democratic values, leading democracies may often overlook violations and maintain strategic partnerships with openly authoritarian regimes (such as Saudi Arabia or Azerbaijan) when such partnerships serve their geopolitical or energy interests. Such policies can erode confidence and discredit the democratic institutions in developing countries, creating a persistent perception within local societies of "democracy" merely as a tool of external manipulation and double standards. These perceptions may facilitate external sharp power penetration and weaken the international appeal of Western democracies' soft power.

A more contested example concerns the Integrity Initiative. Operated by the independent British charity Institute for Statecraft, the Integrity Initiative received funding from the British Foreign and Commonwealth Office, with the stated goal of countering Russian disinformation. However, following a data leak in 2018, allegations emerged that the network conducted coordinated campaigns to influence public opinion and interfere with political appointments, including the proposed appointment of Pedro Baños in Spain.[18] This particular instance illustrates the application of sharp power, where covert actions were directed inward within the system, targeting the domestic policy of allies rather than a rival state.

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[15] Daria Szafarczyk, "Between Soft and Sharp Power: The Role of Disinformation in International Politics on Selected Case Studies," in *Disinformation, Security, and Social Resilience*, ed. Marietta Gieroń and Duncan Thomson (Amsterdam: IOS Press, 2025), 43–44, 47, https://doi.org/10.3233/NICSP250036.

[16] Associated Press, "US Secretly Created 'Cuban Twitter' to Stir Unrest and Undermine Government," *The Guardian*, April 3, 2014, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/apr/03/us-cuban-twitter-zunzuneo-stir-unrest.

[17] Tony Chafer, review of *Colonialism Devours Itself: The Waning of Françafrique*, by Gérard Prunier, *Modern & Contemporary France* 34, no. 2 (2026): 281–82, https://doi.org/10.1080/09639489.2025.2595059.

[18] Paul McKeigue, David Miller, Jake Mason, and Piers Robinson, "Briefing Note on the Integrity Initiative," Working Group on Syria, Propaganda and Media, December 21, 2018, https://research-information.bris.ac.uk/en/publications/briefing-note-on-the-integrity-initiative.

All these examples prove that the use of sharp power is not solely determined by the nature of the regime. Sharp power essentially operates on the logic of hard power influence, but under the guise of soft power and using its resources; it does not seek to win "hearts and minds," but is purposefully aimed at causing destructive consequences in target societies.[19] As J. Nye notes, the best defense against this is the publicity of such attempts, where democracies have a clear advantage.[20] Pomerantsev notes that information manipulation, dark ads, psychological operations, and deepfakes are used today by actors in both authoritarian and democratic countries. Secret funding of European cultural and literary magazines by the US CIA during the Cold War (to counter communist propaganda) and the USSR KGB's Operation INFEKTION (presenting AIDS as an American biological weapon) demonstrate historical precedents for the use of sharp power by both sides.[21] In the modern digital era, sharp power manifests through "algorithm wars" designed to make people "believe in nothing," thereby eroding institutional trust. However, while exposure of sharp power in authoritarian systems may face limited public scrutiny due to information monopolies, the exposure of a democracy's own sharp power can lead to a crisis of legitimacy. To counter these challenges, democratic states often deploy defensive sharp power, which involves anti-manipulation algorithms, targeted restrictions, or secret information countermeasures without projecting influence into an adversary's information space (Table 2).

Table 2. Forms of Sharp Power Manifestation: Defensive vs. Offensive

Feature	**Defensive Sharp Power**	**Offensive Sharp Power**
Main Goal	Protection of domestic information space and reactive countermeasures	Proactive undermining of the target state's internal stability
Target Audience	Internal audience (building trust and vigilance)	External audience (society and elites of the target country)
Toolbox	Fact-checking, transparency laws, anti-manipulation algorithms, targeted restrictions	Disinformation, fake news, cyberattacks, stoking internal divisions
Nature of Impact	**Constructive:** strengthens internal resilience	**Destructive:** creates chaos, distrust, and doubt
Legitimacy	**Context-dependent** (associated with national security)	**Absent** (viewed as interference in internal affairs)

[19] Christopher Walker and Jessica Ludwig, "From 'Soft Power' to 'Sharp Power': Rising Authoritarian Influence in the Democratic World," in *Sharp Power: Rising Authoritarian Influence* (Washington, DC: National Endowment for Democracy, 2017), 8–25, https://www.ned.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/Sharp-Power-Rising-Authoritarian-Influence-Full-Report.pdf.

[20] Joseph S. Nye Jr., "China's Soft and Sharp Power," *Project Syndicate*, January 4, 2018, https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/china-soft-and-sharp-power-by-joseph-s--nye-2018-01.

[21] Peter Pomerantsev, *This Is Not Propaganda: Adventures in the War against Reality* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2019), 8; Elad Simchayoff, "Operation Infektion," *Lessons from History* (blog), Medium, July 30, 2020, https://medium.com/lessons-from-history/operation-infektion-a1485fe85443.

Thus, the definition of sharp power should extend beyond the actions of authoritarian states; it must include manipulative and destructive forms of influence disguised as soft power resources. At the core of the analysis must lie the nature of the impact: is it constructive or destructive? Conditioning the distinction between soft and sharp power exclusively on political regimes calls into question the principle of scientific objectivity.[22] Consequently, defining a country's application of soft power as soft or sharp may depend on the researcher's perspective, the objectives of the study, and the proposed hypothesis.

The use of sharp power by democratic regimes can negatively affect their international reputation, internal stability, and institutional legitimacy. Unlike in authoritarian systems, the exposure of covert manipulation in democracies can lead to a crisis of institutional trust, creating fertile ground for external sharp power penetration.

The main advantage of open societies is the transparency of state institutions and public trust. Therefore, the best approach for countering external sharp power is not the use of counter-manipulative methods, but the mobilization of domestic legitimacy, social solidarity, and comprehensive state power.[23]

Sharp Power, Institutional Trust, and Internal Legitimacy

The study of sharp power shows that high levels of government legitimacy and governance transparency can reduce the effectiveness of external influence. Conversely, institutional distrust and a legitimacy deficit create fertile ground for sharp penetration. External sharp power cannot effectively destabilize a resilient society "from scratch." Instead, it acts as a catalyst that exploits pre-existing internal fractures and a deficit of legitimacy. A low level of institutional trust serves as a key indicator of a state's internal vulnerability, creating fertile ground for information chaos and foreign interference.[24] This pattern is examined through an analysis of comparative data from three democratic states: the US, the United Kingdom, and Germany.

To operationalize the variables identified in this study, internationally recognized indices and databases were used as the conceptual and empirical basis. Below are the definitions of the concepts formulated on the basis of these indices, which directly reflect the variables in our model.

1. **Institutional Gap:** The systemic divergence between formal democratic rules and actual informal practices, accompanied by public alienation from decision-making processes.[25]

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[22] Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics*, new ed. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017), https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvc77bx3.

[23] Comprehensive state power is the systematic, integrated, and interconnected application of its material and non-material resources as a unified concept.

[24] Nye, "How Sharp Power Threatens Soft Power."

[25] Our World in Data, "Trust in Government," accessed August 11, 2026, https://ourworldindata.org/grapher/oecd-average-trust-in-governments.

2. **Media Polarization:** A persistent division of the information landscape into isolated segments, characterized by biased news coverage, a decline in viewpoint pluralism, and the formation of closed "filter bubbles" that create social antagonism and diminish verifiable objective information.[26]
3. **Institutional Resilience:** The systemic capacity of state and societal institutions to absorb shocks, crises, and external information attacks without losing basic functionality.[27]

According to the 2026 Edelman Trust Barometer, the United Kingdom remains within the distrust category, recording a Trust Index of 44 points.[28] Attempts at external interference in electoral processes and the authorities' insufficiently transparent response may have contributed to declining public trust in state institutions. Global Disinformation Index (GDI) reports also identify disinformation risks within the US online media landscape.[29] Since Brexit, the country has faced covert information influences. According to the 2026 Edelman Trust Barometer, widespread distrust, including distrust of official statistics, has emerged in British society, potentially undermining public confidence in government institutions.

Germany's Trust Index increased from 41 points in 2025 to 44 points in 2026, although both scores remained within the distrust category.[30] We contend that this was driven by the energy crisis and the Russo-Ukrainian conflict. According to GDI, although the German media landscape is transparent, it becomes vulnerable through far-right and far-left media outlets, which serve as channels for external sharp power.

Relying on research from the Global Disinformation Index[31] and the Edelman Trust Barometer 2026,[32] we find evidence consistent with our hypothesis that institutional distrust increases external information vulnerability. The analysis examines the relationship between three main variables: media polarization, institutional gap (distrust), and institutional resilience. Specifically, information vulnerability, associated with heightened media polarization, can be mitigated by strengthening public trust in government and enhancing institutional resilience.

Within the framework of the proposed analytical approach, sharp power is viewed not as an autonomous instrument of direct coercion, but rather as an exter-

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[26] Michael Coppedge et al., *V-Dem Codebook v16* (Gothenburg: V-Dem Institute, 2026), 230, https://www.v-dem.net/documents/70/codebook_v16.pdf.

[27] The Fund for Peace, "About SRI," *State Resilience Index*, accessed October 11, 2026, https://fundforpeace.org/SRI/about.html.

[28] Edelman Trust Institute, *2026 Edelman Trust Barometer: Global Report* (Edelman, January 21, 2026), 5, https://www.edelman.com/sites/g/files/aatuss191/files/2026-01/2026%20Edelman%20Trust%20Barometer%20Global%20Report_01.21.26_0.pdf.

[29] Global Disinformation Index, *Disinformation Risk Assessment: The Online News Market in the United States* (London: Global Disinformation Index, December 2022), https://reason.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/gdi_us-mmr-22.pdf.

[30] Edelman Trust Institute, *2026 Edelman Trust Barometer*, 5; Global Disinformation Index, *Media Market Risk Ratings: Germany* (London: Global Disinformation Index, 2020), https://www.disinformationindex.org/files/Germany-Risk-Ratings-Report_ENGLISH.pdf.

[31] Global Disinformation Index, accessed August 11, 2026, https://www.disinformationindex.org/.

[32] Edelman Trust Institute, *2026 Edelman Trust Barometer*.

nal catalyst that exploits and amplifies pre-existing internal crises of legitimacy and deficits in institutional trust. Empirical and theoretical analysis suggests that external destructive influence is less likely to destabilize resilient political systems in the absence of pre-existing vulnerabilities. Instead, it purposefully targets structural fissures already present within society. Manipulative technologies and covert information flows act as a trigger mechanism, accelerating the erosion of institutions where the level of citizens' trust in government is initially undermined. Conversely, societies with high levels of polarization and persistent crises of legitimacy possess greater vulnerability to sharp power. The deficit of trust in key state and public institutions translates into information vulnerability, as citizens cease to rely on official sources for factual verification. As examples demonstrate, the deepening of socio-political division and the decline of trust in institutions create a favorable environment for the formation of closed "information bubbles." In such conditions, external actors gain the ability to effectively project destructive influence, using the system's own internal contradictions as a lever of pressure.[33]

To measure information vulnerability, we developed a preliminary weighted additive composite index incorporating the selected variables.

$$\text{IVI} = w_1 \cdot \tilde{P} + w_2 \cdot \left(1 - \tilde{R}\right) + w_3 \cdot \left(1 - \tilde{T}\right)$$

This mathematical construction reflects the combined effects of the selected variables: while the normalized media polarization index ($\tilde{P}$) directly increases risks, the inverted indicators of institutional resilience ($1 - \tilde{R}$) and trust deficit $\left(1 - \tilde{T}\right)$ demonstrate that a shortage of internal protective mechanisms exponentially amplifies the destructive impact of external information pressure. All variables are assigned equal weights and scaled to the [0, 1] range.

All parameters are scaled to the range [0, 1] using min–max normalization, and the normalized formula for information vulnerability is expressed as follows:

$$\text{IVI} = \frac{P + (1 - R) + (1 - T)}{3}$$

As the Media Polarization Index in the formula, we consider the 2022 results for media polarization from Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) to be the most suitable. To reflect the institutional gap, we have taken the 2022 data for Trust in government[34] from Our World in Data as the closest variable, where the level of public trust in the government across states is measured. We propose converting the obtained results by applying a measurement scale from 0 (lowest) to 1 (highest), allowing the percentage-based trust indicator to be incorporated into the composite

[33] Justin Kempf, host, "Christopher Walker Revisits Sharp Power," *Democracy Paradox* (podcast episode), April 15, 2026, https://democracyparadox.com/2026/04/15/christopher-walker-revisits-sharp-power/.

[34] Our World in Data, "Trust in Government," https://ourworldindata.org/grapher/oecd-average-trust-in-governments?time=earliest..2024&country=GBR~DEU~USA.

index. To measure state resilience, we have used the State Resilience Index (SRI) developed by the Fund for Peace.[35]

According to the 2022 trust in government data from Our World in Data, the United States recorded a trust level of 39%, the United Kingdom 36%, and Germany 62%. According to our proposed scale, Germany stands at 0.62 (high), the United Kingdom at 0.36 (low), and the US at 0.39 (low).

Table 3. Application of the Information Vulnerability Measurement Formula for the US, UK, and Germany

State	Media polarization (V-Dem) (P)	Trust in government (Our World in Data)[36] (T)	Institutional Resilience (SRI)[37] (R)	Information vulnerability
US	0.717	0.39	0.74	0.529
UK	0.742	0.36	0.77	0.537
Germany	0.712	0.62	0.79	0.434

Thus, the obtained results demonstrate that high media polarization and low trust reduce institutional resilience, thereby increasing information vulnerability and the destructive impact of sharp power. Comparing the US (0.717) and the United Kingdom (0.742) reveals distinct structural dynamics. The US exhibits high media polarization driven by partisan antagonisms and algorithmic "filter bubbles,"[38] leading to low government trust (39%). However, American society possesses a degree of institutional resilience shaped by its long-standing polarized media environment, potentially limiting the risk of rapid systemic destabilization. In contrast, the UK displays even higher media polarization—exacerbated by post-Brexit societal divisions—making its public highly susceptible to disinformation and resulting in the lowest government trust (36%). Germany records the lowest information vulnerability score among the three states, having higher institutional resilience and government trust. Public trust in the government serves as an "armor," which does not allow media polarization to turn into information chaos.

Comparative Analysis of the Application of Sharp Power by the States of the South Caucasus

The analysis of information vulnerability in the US, Germany, and the UK made it possible to formulate a comparable measurement framework for states with different governance systems. The selected cases of the South Caucasus countries, as states in the same region with different governance systems, are important to understanding whether patterns of information vulnerability in different regimes are

[35] The Fund for Peace, "About SRI."
[36] Our World in Data, "Trust in Government."
[37] The Fund for Peace, "About SRI."
[38] Eli Pariser, *The Filter Bubble: What the Internet Is Hiding from You* (New York: Penguin Press, 2011); Amy Ross Arguedas, Craig T. Robertson, Richard Fletcher, and Rasmus Kleis Nielsen, *Echo Chambers, Filter Bubbles, and Polarisation: A Literature Review* (Oxford: Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, 2022), https://doi.org/10.60625/risj-etxj-7k60.

comparable to those of developed democracies. As an empirical basis, data from the Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU) Democracy Index for 2023–2025 were considered, allowing for a more systematic examination of the relationship between sharp power and the nature of the regime. The three states of the South Caucasus, shaped by security priorities and regime characteristics, exhibit different patterns of response to sharp power. In the case of Azerbaijan, sharp power is aimed at the external legitimization of the authoritarian regime; in the case of Armenia and Georgia, it frequently turns into a core factor of internal political struggle and external confrontation.

Table 4. Comparison of the Regimes of the Three South Caucasus States According to the Years 2023–2025[39]

Country	2023 (Unit/Type)	2024 (Unit/Type)	2025 (Unit/Type)
Armenia	5.42 / Hybrid	5.35 / Hybrid	5.58 / Hybrid
Georgia	5.20 / Hybrid	4.70 / Hybrid	4.85 / Hybrid
Azerbaijan	2.80 / Authoritarian	2.80 / Authoritarian	2.82 / Authoritarian

According to 2023–2025 data from the Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU), the democratic picture of the South Caucasus is as follows: Armenia remains near the upper threshold of the "hybrid regime" category (5.58 points), Georgia is seeing democratic backsliding (4.85 points) with tendencies moving toward authoritarianism, while Azerbaijan maintains characteristics of a stable authoritarian system (2.82 points).

In our proposed model to measure informational vulnerability, the variable "Trust in government" is pivotal, for which comparable empirical data remain limited. Since the Caucasus Research Resource Centers (CRRC) ceased operations in Azerbaijan in 2013, recent comparable data have been unavailable from publicly accessible sources. Therefore, to apply the proposed model, the method of extrapolation was applied by choosing a proxy variable.

Given the central role of political leaders in authoritarian systems and the possibility that response bias may affect the accuracy of public opinion surveys, the results of Azerbaijan's 2024 presidential election were used as the basis for the analysis. To ensure the model's comparability, the corresponding indicators for 2024 were also used for Armenia and Georgia.

In the October 9, 2013, presidential elections, incumbent Ilham Aliyev received 84.54% of the vote,[40] closely aligning with the 84% trust rating reported by

[39] Economist Intelligence Unit, *Democracy Index 2025: Democracy Stabilises after Eight Years of Decline* (London: Economist Intelligence Unit, 2026), https://www.eiu.com/n/campaigns/democracy-index-2025/.

[40] European Parliament, *Election Observation Delegation to the Presidential Elections in Azerbaijan (9 October 2013)*, report by Pino Arlacchi (Brussels: European Parliament, 2013), https://www.europarl.europa.eu/cmsdata/212630/Azerbaijan-presidential-elections_09-October-2013_European-Parliament-report.pdf; OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR), *Republic of Azerbaijan, Presidential Election, 9 October 2013: ODIHR Election Observation Mission Final Report* (Warsaw: OSCE/ODIHR, 2013), 29, https://www.osce.org/institutions/110015.

the CRRC that same year (a 0.54% deviation).[41] Following 86.02% in 2018,[42] Aliyev received 92.12% in the February 7, 2024 snap elections.[43] Factoring in the historical 0.54% survey deviation, this reflects an adjusted trust index of ~91.58% following the 2020 Karabakh war, capturing an approximate ten percent post-war rally associated with the incumbent regime's victory.

Thus, for 2024, the estimated value of the extrapolated variable used as a proxy for trust in government is 91.58%. According to the 2024 results of CRRC,[44] the trust in government indicator stands at 28% in Armenia and 31% in Georgia. By applying our proposed information vulnerability measurement formula, let us now understand what level of information vulnerability states with three different regimes and regional problems have:

Table 5. Application of the Information Vulnerability Measurement Formula for Armenia, Georgia, Azerbaijan

State	Media bias (V-Dem: v2mebias, 2024)	Trust in government (CRRC)	Institutional Resilience 2022 (SRI)[45]	Information vulnerability
Armenia	0.608	0.28	0.60	0.576
Georgia	0.571	0.31	0.60	0.554
Azerbaijan	0.305	0.92	0.50	0.295

Applying the formula creates an interesting picture using the example of the South Caucasus, where three states in the same region with different regimes are compared (Table 5). According to the V-Dem methodology, Azerbaijan's low media polarization score means that in the country "print and broadcast media cover not only the official party or candidates, but all opposition parties or candidates receive only negative coverage."[46] This suggests that conventional patterns of media polarization are less visible in this case, since the official narrative dominates the information landscape due to restrictions on media freedom and extensive state control over information channels.

In authoritarian systems, the maximum indicator of trust in the government creates a paradox at first glance. It reflects restrictions on media freedom, the sup-

[41] Caucasus Research Resource Centers (CRRC), "Caucasus Barometer 2013 Azerbaijan: Trust in President (TRUPRES)," accessed August 11, 2026, https://caucasusbarometer.org/en/cb2013az/TRUPRES/.
[42] OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR), *Republic of Azerbaijan, Early Presidential Election, 11 April 2018: ODIHR Election Observation Mission Final Report* (Warsaw: OSCE/ODIHR, 2018), 26, https://odihr.osce.org/odihr/elections/azerbaijan/388580.
[43] OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR), *Republic of Azerbaijan, Early Presidential Election, 7 February 2024: ODIHR Election Observation Mission Final Report* (Warsaw: OSCE/ODIHR, 2025), https://odihr.osce.org/sites/default/files/f/documents/0/6/586281_0.pdf.
[44] Caucasus Research Resource Centers (CRRC), "Caucasus Barometer 2024 Regional Dataset: Trust – Executive Government (TRUEXEC)," accessed August 11, 2026, https://caucasusbarometer.org/en/cb2024/TRUEXEC/.
[45] The Fund for Peace, "About SRI." The 2022 State Resilience Index dataset is used in this study because it is the most recent dataset listed for download by the Fund for Peace.
[46] Coppedge et al., *V-Dem Codebook v16*, 230.

pression of alternative viewpoints, and state control over information, rather than the actual distribution of public attitudes. The model's low vulnerability score may therefore underestimate the country's vulnerabilities, as the selected indicators capture only part of their complexity. To neutralize the concealed vulnerability of their own information domain, authoritarian states tend to transfer information attacks to the field of other countries. This may help explain why authoritarian systems resort to offensive sharp power. In the South Caucasus, Armenia is the most vulnerable in the information domain, which is conditioned by the offensive sharp power policy pursued by Azerbaijan, Turkey, and other external actors, as well as other internal and external factors. Azerbaijan's sharp power policy includes two main components: information aggression (targeted disinformation, psychological pressure) and corruption penetration (known as "caviar diplomacy").[47]

International research and legal cases indicate that "caviar diplomacy," presented outwardly as hospitality or an expression of soft power, constitutes an elaborate corruption scheme aimed at advancing Azerbaijan's political interests through bribery involving international officials and influential figures.[48] Information aggression is directed specifically against Armenia, where historical revisionism, applied as sharp power against Armenia, has become one of the main directions of Azerbaijan's foreign policy after 2020–2023. A vivid expression of this is the state-sponsored "Western Azerbaijan" concept,[49] which includes all the characteristics of sharp power described by Walker and Ludwig.

The key purpose of this concept is to sideline the rights and potential claims of Armenians forcibly displaced from Nagorno-Karabakh by contrasting them with a corresponding set of counterclaims. In the context of sharp power, this can be characterized as "agenda hijacking."[50] Azerbaijan attempts to neutralize the natural and inalienable right of the people of Nagorno-Karabakh to live in their homeland through an artificially created antithesis and the opportunities provided by "caviar diplomacy."

Thus, through manipulative tactics and the practice of "agenda hijacking," Azerbaijan carries out a "sharp" infiltration into areas of concern to the international community, aiming to call into question the legitimacy of the Armenian side's rights. Furthermore, the widespread rewriting of historical facts and the systematic destruction or appropriation of Armenian cultural heritage are often presented as cultural diplomacy. In practice, however, these activities aim to undermine ownership rights and the legitimacy of claims to Armenian cultural heritage.[51] This is precisely the form of sharp power that we have termed offensive sharp power.

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[47] European Stability Initiative (ESI), "Caviar Diplomacy: Why Every European Should Care," accessed March 9, 2026, https://www.esiweb.org/proposals/caviar-diplomacy.

[48] European Stability Initiative, "Caviar Diplomacy."

[49] "The Western Azerbaijan Community," *Virtual Western Azerbaijan*, accessed June 2, 2026, https://qerbiazerbaycan.com/en/the-western-azerbaijan-community/.

[50] Christopher Witko, Jana Morgan, Nathan J. Kelly, and Peter K. Enns, *Hijacking the Agenda: Economic Power and Political Influence* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2021), https://www.russellsage.org/publications/book/hijacking-agenda.

[51] Hayastan A. Martirosyan, "Azerbaijan's Policy of Forced Cultural Appropriation after the Second Artsakh War: The Case of Dadivank Monastery," *International Journal of Armenian Genocide Studies* 7, no. 2 (2022): 91–135, https://doi.org/10.51442/ijags.0035.

The establishment of the Baku Initiative Group (BIG) serves as a classic example of Azerbaijan deploying sharp power under the guise of soft power, targeting France rather than Armenia. Cloaking itself in the rhetoric of "anti-colonial struggle" and "human rights protection," Azerbaijan utilizes disinformation and manipulation to target French overseas territories (Guadeloupe, Martinique, French Guiana, New Caledonia, and French Polynesia).[52] From 2020 on, alongside the strategic deepening of Armenian-French relations, Azerbaijan launched an offensive sharp power policy against France. According to a report by the French governmental agency VIGINUM (France's service for countering foreign digital interference), the Azerbaijani side targeted France's pro-Armenian policy on the X (formerly Twitter) platform through a network of bots and fake accounts.[53]

Through this agenda-hijacking tactic, Azerbaijan has sought to disrupt public discourse surrounding the 2024 Paris Olympic Games, undermine confidence in the French authorities, and damage France's international reputation as a democratic state. This illustrates Azerbaijan's use of offensive sharp power.

Since 2020, Armenia has faced the active deployment of sharp power by external actors as a means of "non-violent" influence. While Azerbaijan acts as an exporter of offensive sharp power, Armenia simultaneously bears its impact and, as a defensive countermeasure, employs defensive sharp power. The latter implies using counter-manipulative algorithms, targeted blocking measures, or covert informational counterstrikes. The primary goal of external sharp power is to deepen domestic polarization through social media and mass media, reduce the state's resilience, and increase informational vulnerability.

Under conditions of an asymmetric regional balance, external pressure, specifically demands to revise constitutional foundations and institutional markers of identity, acts as a powerful catalyst for internal political fragmentation.[54] The leadership of the target state faces a systemic dilemma: adapting the legal framework to meet the demands of an external actor reduces the risks of escalation, yet simultaneously deepens the domestic crisis of legitimacy, as society may perceive such changes as the result of external pressure.[55]

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[52] Damien Leloup and Florian Reynaud, "Azerbaijan's Interference Operations in New Caledonia Are Only Part of the Story," *Le Monde*, May 17, 2024, https://www.lemonde.fr/en/pixels/article/2024/05/17/azerbaijan-s-interference-operations-in-new-caledonia-is-only-part-of-the-story_6671708_13.html.

[53] VIGINUM, *UN-notorious BIG: A Digital Information Manipulation Campaign Targeting French Overseas Departments, Regions, Territories and Corsica* (Paris: Secrétariat général de la défense et de la sécurité nationale, December 2, 2024), in French: [VIGINUM, *UN-notorious BIG : une campagne numérique de manipulation de l'information ciblant les DROM-COM et la Corse* (Paris: Secrétariat général de la défense et de la sécurité nationale, 2 décembre 2024)], https://www.sgdsn.gouv.fr/publications/un-notorious-big-une-campagne-numerique-de-manipulation-de-linformation-ciblant-les.

[54] Nailia Bagirova, "Azerbaijan at 'Real Peace' with Armenia but Wants It to Change Constitution," *Reuters*, July 16, 2026, https://www.reuters.com/world/azerbaijan-real-peace-with-armenia-wants-it-change-constitution-2026-07-16/.

[55] Alexander Shpunt, *Conflict between the Authorities of Armenia and the Armenian Apostolic Church: Causes, Participants, Chronology and Development Scenarios*, PSCRP-BESA Reports, no. 202 (Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies, May 12, 2026), https://besacenter.org/conflict-between-the-authorities-of-armenia-and-the-armenian-apostolic-church-causes-participants-chronology-and-development-scenarios/.

Hybrid regimes face a "resilience dilemma": whether to respond with similar manipulative tools, thereby risking their own democratic image, or to adopt a defensive sharp power strategy. Nevertheless, defensive sharp power also has limitations. A more stable foundation for resilience can be built by strengthening government legitimacy, increasing institutional transparency, and fostering public trust.

In the case of Georgia, the deployment of sharp power has a pronounced geopolitical dimension. The Russo-Georgian conflict, European integration, and the Russia–Ukraine war have deepened societal divisions, as competing narratives of "traditional values" and a "European future" have become subjects of political manipulation. In the 2024 parliamentary elections, offensive sharp power was deployed by several geopolitical poles: the ruling force was characterized as pro-Russian, the opposition was accused of trying to drag the country into war, and statements by high-ranking EU officials (describing the elections as a "referendum between Europe and Russia")[56] contributed to an atmosphere of an "existential dilemma" aimed at reorienting voters.

Table 6. Comparison of Sharp Power Resources of the South Caucasus States

Indicator	Azerbaijan	Armenia	Georgia
Type of Sharp Power	Offensive	Defensive	Mixed
Main Resource	Petrodollars, energy statecraft, external lobbying	Global diaspora networks, image of democratic reform	Strategic geographic transit location, values-based and pro-EU discourse
Target	International community, Western political institutions, regional rivals	International public opinion, foreign governments, diaspora communities	Euro-Atlantic structures, domestic electorate, regional trade partners
Toolbox	Caviar diplomacy, media influence, targeted lobbying campaigns	Public diplomacy, narrative leveraging, institutional appeals	Political polarization, contested NGO laws, strategic legislative alignment
Primary Objective	Legitimizing the state narrative, capturing elites, and suppressing external pressure	Securing diplomatic backing, countering isolation, and raising the costs of aggression	Navigating domestic power dynamics and balancing pro-EU and regional influences

The experience of the South Caucasus states demonstrates (Table 6) that authoritarian systems are more prone to the deployment of offensive sharp power, whereas hybrid regimes (Armenia, Georgia) resort to sharp power primarily in the course of responding to external and internal influences. Our proposed information

[56] Josep Borrell, "Georgia: Statement by the High Representative Josep Borrell on the Latest Developments Following the Parliamentary Elections," European External Action Service, October 29, 2024, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/georgia-statement-high-representative-josep-borrell-latest-developments-following-parliamentary_en.

vulnerability index suggests a relationship between media freedom and information vulnerability. Although Azerbaijan had the highest indicator of trust in the government, the lack of free media renders the reliability of the information vulnerability indicator ambiguous, which in turn compels authoritarian states to conceal their own internal vulnerability. Sharp power applied against external threats is predominantly defensive in nature (defensive sharp power). However, in domestic politics, regardless of the nature of the regime, sharp power is utilized by both authorities and the opposition for both offensive and defensive purposes.

Conclusion

The synthesis of classical and modern concepts of power allows us to state that power involves the use of behavioral and material resources to influence a target's behavior in ways desired by the influencing party. The analysis suggests that the examined theories of power are interconnected, and their application is determined by the goals and tools of influence rather than solely by the type of political regime. This analysis confirms one of the article's core theses: the boundary between sharp and soft powers is extremely subtle. If a state-sponsored ideology (e.g., the "anti-colonial" struggle) relies on the freedom of peoples and voluntary attraction, it is soft power. However, when the same rhetoric advances one's own geopolitical interests and trade, as in Azerbaijan's case, it becomes sharp power. Therefore, the watershed between sharp power and soft power passes where voluntary attraction ends and covert coercion begins. In the region, information flows and seemingly "soft" tools (culture, media, and religion) have turned into weapons, serving hard political goals through sharp penetration.

The comparative analysis of the South Caucasus reveals how sharp power assumes different forms according to the political objectives, institutional conditions, and resources of the states involved. Azerbaijan's external lobbying networks, information campaigns, and manipulation of international agendas illustrate the offensive application of sharp power, particularly in efforts to shape foreign perceptions and weaken competing political claims. Armenia's experience highlights the challenges of responding to such pressure while maintaining institutional legitimacy and public trust. Georgia, in turn, demonstrates how competing geopolitical narratives and domestic polarization create opportunities for both external influence and internal political manipulation. These differences suggest that the effectiveness of sharp power depends as much on the vulnerabilities of the target as on the capabilities of the actor exercising influence. The proposed information vulnerability index offers an initial framework for examining this relationship, while the comparative findings underscore the importance of media freedom, institutional resilience, and public trust in assessing states' exposure to manipulative influence.

Research Limitations and Future Directions: One of the main methodological limitations of this study is that the proposed Information Vulnerability Index (IVI) is based on a weighted additive composite model. As a preliminary attempt to integrate the selected variables into a common measurement framework, this model has certain limitations arising from its linear structure and may not fully capture the

nonlinear and complex interactions among the variables. In addition, the weights assigned to each indicator (w_1, w_2, w_3) in the current model involve a degree of subjectivity and require further empirical validation.

Given these limitations, future research can proceed in the following directions:

1. Move from an additive model toward constructing more complex, multiplicative, or hierarchical indexes, which will allow capturing the mutual influence of information vulnerability components more accurately.
2. Apply expert survey (Delphi method, analytic hierarchy process) or data-driven (for example, factor analysis) approaches to define the weights of variables more objectively.
3. Apply the index to different regional or temporal data to test its stability and predictive power.

AI Declaration: AI tools, including ChatGPT and Google Gemini, were used during manuscript development to assist with research organization, literature search, Armenian-to-English translation, and formatting/transliterating bibliographic entries into Chicago style. All interpretations and references were reviewed and verified by the authors. They retain full responsibility for the originality, accuracy, validity, and integrity of the manuscript.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research.

Ethical Standards

The authors affirm this research did not involve human subjects.

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