Texte 8

AUTOCRATS ARE FINDING NEW WAYS

TO SQUASH FREE EXPRESSION ONLINE

On October 8th a Russian journalist, Dmitry Muratov won the Nobel peace prize for his

“efforts to safeguard freedom of expression”. The Kremlin congratulated Mr Muratov for being

“brave”, which he is. Six of his colleagues at Novaya Gazeta, the Russian newspaper he founded

in 1993, have been murdered. The Nobel award recognizes a sad truth. Globally, freedom of

expression is in retreat. Autocrats often use the sword against the pen (or bullets against

bloggers). But these old-fashioned forms of repression are increasingly replaced by newer

techniques. Freedom House, a think tank, reports that last year efforts to control speech online

escalated in 30 of the countries it monitors.

In China, the Communist Party has overseen the construction of a walled-off information

sphere, within which criticism of those in power can barely be seen or heard. Its national firewall

blocks access to foreign social media and a host of other sources of information. Armies of human

censors scan Chinese websites. In 2009 the government suspended internet access in Xinjiang, a

western region, following riots there. Now the internet is up again but police force Uyghurs, an

oppressed minority, to install mobile apps that spy on all their online activity. They can be locked

up for downloading a foreign product like Skype, or software that lets them visit foreign sites such

as Facebook. China also exports software and hardware that help other regimes build a more

authoritarian internet. Iran is a happy customer, now blocking popular foreign services such as

Twitter and Telegram.

But Russia’s plans for purging the domestic internet of free thought are among the most

ambitious. Putin claims the global internet is a tool of the CIA. In 2019 he signed an internet

sovereignty law ordering all internet providers to install technology that allows the Kremlin to track,

filter and reroute traffic.

Autocrats are using new software to spy on citizens no matter which devices they own or

which websites they visit. Freedom House says 45 countries in its sample were found to have

used such spyware in the past 12 months; it calls this a “crisis for human rights”. This whizzy

technology is increasingly combined with new laws to chill speech. Last year police in at least 55

of the 70 countries monitored by Freedom House investigated, arrested or convicted someone

because of posts made on social media.

Leaders of all stripes took fright when, in January, big social-media sites suspended Donald

Trump’s account for inciting insurrection. But autocracies will doubtlessly continue to combine

high-and low-tech ways of suppressing online speech. Freedom House found that last year people

in 41 countries were beaten up or killed because of things they had said on line.

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Adapted from The Economist

October 2021

(457 words)