Across the world there is a growing number of cases of ‘shadow power’, i.e. foreign power projection through soft cultural institutions. Gulenist schools, the Orthodox Church, Middle Eastern charities, western think tanks and NGOs are examples. Such power is increasingly common in our globalized media-centric world, but it also brings much uncertainty.

The Russian Orthodox Church is building a new cathedral in the heart of Paris close to an important state palace. A spiritual center near the Eiffel Tower has been dubbed “St Vladimir’s” because of its links with the Kremlin. Also in countries like Moldova and Montenegro, the Russian Orthodox Church promotes the agenda of Russian foreign policy.

Kremlin-backed hackers allegedly attacked the Democratic National Committee and seem to favor a Trump presidency, while Hillary Clinton has come under fire for having too strong links with Wall Street as well as billionaire George Soros and his Open Society Foundation.

President Erdogan of Turkey has mobilized Turks around the world against the Gulen movement. As a result children have been taken out of schools in the Netherlands. The secretive Gulen movement has schools throughout the world.

There is increasing controversy about the funding of mosques, communities and charities by Gulf states like Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Kuwait and UAE and their role in spreading extremism.

There is growing criticism of the funding of foreign governments and companies going to think tanks who can couch their interests in objective terms. From India to Egypt and Ethiopia, there is a global crackdown on NGOs. Increasingly, they are perceived as agents of foreign governments.

Traditional power projection between countries is through (outside) military or diplomatic means. There is also a non-controversial form of soft power by promoting certain cultures through institutions like Maison Descartes, the Goethe and the Confucius Institute. There is however also a range of examples where the intentions and goals are more subtle and unclear. It is a kind of “shadow power”: foreign strategic agendas are propagated through ‘soft’ and more cultural channels. Examples involve religious institutions, charities, schools, hackers, think tanks and NGOs.

The rise of this type of power is linked with the process of globalization. Open borders and free-flowing capital have created a range of connections across national borders that are hard to discern. Complex constructions can make charities or schools for instance fronts for certain political agendas.

Also technology makes it easier for people to stay in direct contact with relations abroad and thus also facilitates foreign influence. In a postmodern/post-nation-state context people can have complex identities and loyalties.

Finally, the power of media in everyday life also makes controlling ideas and images more important. Media moves the masses directly. Rather than wage war with powerful hardware, it is becoming more important to capture hearts and minds of people.

The shadowy nature of this type of power will increasingly create insecurity and distrust. It calls for more transparency and ways for countries to control the influence of foreign powers within their borders. At the same time however, we can expect the means of influence to become ever more subtle.

Platforms or filters that offer transparency about relations in networks of organizations.

Trusted partners/unique media assets that have strong soft power.