AUTOCRACY, INC.

THE DICTATORS WHO WANT TO RUN THE WORLD



ANNE APPLEBAUM

WINNER OF THE PULITZER PRIZE

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The Dictators Who Want to Run the World

Anne Applebaum



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Introduction

Autocracy, Inc.

All of us have in our minds a cartoon image of an autocratic state. There is a bad man at the top. He controls the army and the police. The army and the police threaten the people with violence. There are evil collaborators, and maybe some brave dissidents.

But in the twenty-first century, that cartoon bears little resemblance to reality. Nowadays, autocracies are run not by one bad guy but by sophisticated networks relying on kleptocratic financial structures, a complex of security services—military, paramilitary, police—and technological experts who provide surveillance, propaganda, and disinformation. The members of these networks are connected not only to one another within a given autocracy but also to networks in other autocratic countries, and sometimes in democracies too. Corrupt, state-controlled companies in one dictatorship do business with corrupt, state-controlled companies in another. The police in one country may arm, equip, and train the police in many others. The propagandists share resources—the troll

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farms and media networks that promote one dictator's propaganda can also be used to promote another's—as well as themes: the degeneracy of democracy, the stability of autocracy, the evil of America.

This is not to say that there is some secret room where bad guys meet, as in a James Bond movie. Nor is our conflict with them a black-and-white, binary contest, a "Cold War 2.0." Among modern autocrats are people who call themselves communists, monarchists, nationalists, and theocrats. Their regimes have different historical roots, different goals, different aesthetics. Chinese communism and Russian nationalism differ not only from each other but from Venezuela's Bolivarian socialism, North Korea's *Juche,* or the Shia radicalism of the Islamic Republic of Iran. All of them differ from the Arab monarchies and others—Saudi Arabia, the Emirates, Vietnam—which mostly don't seek to undermine the democratic world. They also differ from the softer autocracies and hybrid democracies, sometimes called illiberal democracies—Turkey, Singapore, India, the Philippines, Hungary—which sometimes align with the democratic world and sometimes don't. Unlike military or political alliances from other times and places, this group operates not like a bloc but rather like an agglomeration of companies, bound not by ideology but rather by a ruthless, single-minded determination to preserve their personal wealth and power: Autocracy, Inc.

Instead of ideas, the strongmen who lead Russia, China, Iran, North Korea, Venezuela, Nicaragua, Angola, Myanmar, Cuba, Syria, Zimbabwe, Mali, Belarus, Sudan, Azerbai-

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jan, and perhaps three dozen others share a determination to deprive their citizens of any real influence or public voice, to push back against all forms of transparency or accountability, and to repress anyone, at home or abroad, who challenges them. They also share a brutally pragmatic approach to wealth. Unlike the fascist and communist leaders of the past, who had party machines behind them and did not showcase their greed, the leaders of Autocracy, Inc., often maintain opulent residences and structure much of their collaboration as for-profit ventures. Their bonds with one another, and with their friends in the democratic world, are cemented not through ideals but through deals—deals designed to take the edge off sanctions, to exchange surveillance technology, to help one another get rich.

Autocracy, Inc., also collaborates to keep its members in power. Alexander Lukashenko's unpopular regime in Belarus has been criticized by multiple international bodies—the European Union, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe—and shunned by its European neighbors. Many Belarusian goods cannot be sold in the United States or the EU. The national airline, Belavia, cannot fly to European countries. And yet, in practice, Belarus is not isolated at all. More than two dozen Chinese companies have invested money in Belarus, even building a China-Belarus Industrial Park, modeled on a similar project in Suzhou. Iran and Belarus exchanged high-level diplomatic visits in 2023. Cuban officials have expressed solidarity with Lukashenko at the UN. Russia offers markets, cross-border investment, political support, and probably police and security services

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too. In 2020, when Belarusian journalists rebelled and refused to report a false election result, Russia sent Russian journalists to replace them. In return, Belarus's regime has allowed Russia to base troops and weapons on its territory and to use those assets to attack Ukraine.

Venezuela is also, in theory, an international pariah. Since 2008, the United States, Canada, and the European Union have ramped up sanctions on Venezuela in response to the regime's brutality, drug smuggling, and links to international crime. Yet President Nicolás Maduro's regime receives loans from Russia, which also invests in Venezuela's oil industry, as does Iran. A Belarusian company assembles tractors in Venezuela. Turkey facilitates the illicit Venezuelan gold trade. Cuba has long provided security advisers and security technology to its counterparts in Caracas. Chinese-made water cannons, tear-gas canisters, and shields were used to crush street protesters in Caracas in 2014 and again in 2017, leaving more than seventy dead, while Chinese-designed surveillance technology is used to monitor the public too. Meanwhile, the international narcotics trade keeps individual members of the regime, along with their entourages and families, well supplied with Versace and Chanel.

The Belarusian and Venezuelan dictators are widely despised within their own countries. Both would lose free elections, if such elections were ever held. Both have powerful opponents: the Belarusian and the Venezuelan opposition movements have been led by a range of charismatic leaders and dedicated grassroots activists who have inspired their fellow citizens to take risks, to work for change, to come

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out onto the streets in protest. In August 2020, more than a million Belarusians, out of a population of only ten million, protested in the streets against stolen elections. Hundreds of thousands of Venezuelans repeatedly participated in protests across the country too.

If their only enemies had been the corrupt, bankrupt Venezuelan regime or the brutal, ugly Belarusian regime, these protest movements might have won. But they were not fighting autocrats only at home; they were fighting autocrats around the world who control state companies in multiple countries and who can use them to make investment decisions worth billions of dollars. They were fighting regimes that can buy security cameras from China or bots from St. Petersburg. Above all, they were fighting against rulers who long ago hardened themselves to the feelings and opinions of their countrymen, as well as the feelings and opinions of everybody else. Autocracy, Inc., offers its members not only money and security but also something less tangible: impunity.

The conviction, common among the most committed autocrats, that the outside world cannot touch them—that the views of other nations don't matter and that no court of public opinion will ever judge them—is relatively recent. Once upon a time the leaders of the Soviet Union, the most powerful autocracy in the second half of the twentieth century, cared deeply about how they were perceived around the world. They vigorously promoted the superiority of their political system, and they objected when it was criticized. They at least paid lip service to the aspirational system of norms and treaties set up after World War II, with

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its language about universal human rights, the laws of war, and the rule of law more generally. When the Soviet premier Nikita Khrushchev stood up in the United Nations and banged his shoe on the table, as he famously did in the General Assembly in 1960, it was because a Filipino delegate said that Soviet-occupied Eastern Europe had been "deprived of political and civil rights" and "swallowed up by the Soviet Union." Khrushchev felt it was important to object. Even in the early part of this century, most dictatorships hid their true intentions behind elaborate, carefully manipulated performances of democracy.

Today, the members of Autocracy, Inc., no longer care if they or their countries are criticized or by whom. Some, like the leaders of Myanmar and Zimbabwe, don't stand for anything beyond self-enrichment and the desire to remain in power, and so can't be embarrassed. The leaders of Iran confidently discount the views of Western infidels. The leaders of Cuba and Venezuela treat criticism from abroad as evidence of the vast imperial plot organized against them. The leaders of China and Russia have spent a decade disputing the human rights language long used by international institutions, successfully convincing many around the world that the treaties and conventions on war and genocide—and concepts such as "civil liberties" and "the rule of law"—embody Western ideas that don't apply to them.

Impervious to international criticism, modern autocrats feel no shame about the use of open brutality. The Burmese junta does not hide the fact that it has murdered hundreds of protesters, including young teenagers, on the streets of

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Rangoon. The Zimbabwean regime harasses opposition candidates in plain sight during farcical fake elections. The Chinese government boasts about its destruction of the popular democracy movement in Hong Kong and its "anti-extremist" campaign—involving mass arrests and concentration camps for thousands of Muslim Uighurs—in Xinjiang. The Iranian regime does not conceal its violent repression of Iranian women.

At the extremes, such contempt can devolve into what the international democracy activist Srdja Popovic has called the "Maduro model" of governance, after the current leader of Venezuela. Autocrats who adopt it are "willing to see their country enter the category of failed states," he says—accepting economic collapse, endemic violence, mass poverty, and international isolation if that's what it takes to stay in power. Like Maduro, Presidents Bashir al-Assad in Syria and Lukashenko in Belarus seem entirely comfortable ruling over collapsed economies and societies. These kinds of regimes can be hard for the inhabitants of democracies to understand, because their primary goal is not to create prosperity or enhance the well-being of citizens. Their primary goal is to stay in power, and to do so, they are willing to destabilize their neighbors, destroy the lives of ordinary people, or—following in the footsteps of their predecessors—even send hundreds of thousands of their citizens to their deaths.

In the twentieth century, the autocratic world was no more unified than it is today. Communists and fascists went to

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war with each other. Sometimes communists fought communists too. But they did have common views about the political system that Lenin, the founder of the Soviet state, referred to sneeringly as "bourgeois democracy," which he called "restricted, truncated, false, and hypocritical, a paradise for the rich and a snare and deception for the exploited, for the poor." "Pure democracy" he wrote, was "the mendacious phrase of a liberal who wants to fool the workers." As the leader of what was originally a tiny political faction, Lenin was, unsurprisingly, dismissive of the idea of free elections too: "Only scoundrels and simpletons can think that the proletariat must first win a majority in elections carried out under the yoke of the bourgeoisie. . . . This is the height of stupidity."

The founders of fascism, although bitterly opposed to Lenin's regime, were equally dismissive about their democratic opponents. Mussolini, the Italian leader whose movement coined the words "fascism" and "totalitarianism," mocked liberal societies as weak and degenerate. "The liberal state is destined to perish," he predicted in 1932. "All the political experiments of our day are anti-liberal." He also flipped the definition of "democracy," defining the Italian and German dictatorships as "the greatest and soundest democracies which exist in the world today." Hitler's critique of liberalism followed the same pattern. He wrote in *Mein Kampf* that parliamentary democracy is "one of the most serious signs of decay in mankind" and declared that it is not "individual freedom which is a sign of a higher level of culture but the

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restriction of individual freedom," if carried out by a racially pure organization.

As early as 1929, Mao Zedong, who later became the dictator of the People's Republic of China, also warned against what he called "ultra-democracy," because "these ideas are utterly incompatible with the fighting tasks of the proletariat"—a statement later reproduced in his *Little Red Book*. One of the founding documents of the modern Myanmar regime, a 1962 memo titled "The Burmese Way to Socialism," contains a tirade against elected legislatures: "Burma's 'parliamentary democracy' has not only failed to serve our socialist development but also, due to its very inconsistencies, defects, weaknesses and loopholes, its abuses and the absence of a mature public opinion, lost sight of and deviated from the socialist aims."

Sayyid Qutb, one of the intellectual founders of modern radical Islam, borrowed both the communist belief in a universal revolution and the fascist belief in the liberating power of violence. Like Hitler and Stalin, he argued that liberal ideas and modern commerce posed a threat to the creation of an ideal civilization—in this case, Islamic civilization. He built an ideology around opposition to democracy and individual rights, crafting a cult of destruction and death. The Iranian scholars and human rights activists Ladan and Roya Boroumand have written that Qutb imagined that an "ideologically self-conscious, vanguard minority" would lead a violent revolution in order to create an ideal society, "a classless one where the 'selfish individual' of liberal democracies would

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be banished and the 'exploitation of man by man' would be abolished. God alone would govern it through the implementation of Islamic law (*shari'a*)." This, they write, was "Leninism in Islamist dress."

Modern autocrats differ in many ways from their twentieth-century predecessors. But the heirs, successors, and imitators of these older leaders and thinkers, however varied their ideologies, do have a common enemy. That enemy is us.

To be more precise, that enemy is the democratic world, "the West," NATO, the European Union, their own, internal democratic opponents, and the liberal ideas that inspire all of them. These include the notion that the law is a neutral force, not subject to the whims of politics; that courts and judges should be independent; that political opposition is legitimate; that the rights to speech and assembly can be guaranteed; and that there can be independent journalists and writers and thinkers who are capable of being critical of the ruling party or leader while at the same time remaining loyal to the state.

Autocrats hate these principles because they threaten their power. If judges and juries are independent, then they can hold rulers to account. If there is a genuinely free press, journalists can expose high-level theft and corruption. If the political system empowers citizens to influence the government, then citizens can eventually change the regime.

Their enmity toward the democratic world is not merely some form of traditional geopolitical competition, as "realists" and so many international relations strategists still believe. Their opposition rather has its roots in the very nature of the

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democratic political system, in words like "accountability," "transparency," and "democracy." They hear that language coming from the democratic world, they hear the same language coming from their own dissidents, and they seek to destroy them both. Their own rhetoric makes this clear. In 2013, as Xi Jinping was beginning his rise to power, an internal Chinese memo known, enigmatically, as Document Number Nine or, more formally, as the "Communiqué on the Current State of the Ideological Sphere," listed the "seven perils" faced by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Western constitutional democracy led the list, followed by "universal values," media independence and civic participation, as well as "nihilist" criticism of the Communist Party. The now-infamous document concluded that "Western forces hostile to China," together with dissidents inside the country, "are still constantly infiltrating the ideological sphere." The document went on to instruct party leaders to push back against these ideas and to control them in public spaces, above all on the internet, wherever they found them.

Since at least 2004, the Russians have focused on the same set of threats. In that year, Ukrainians staged a popular revolt, known as the Orange Revolution—the name came from the orange T-shirts and orange flags of the protesters—against a clumsy attempt to steal a presidential election. The angry intervention of the Ukrainian public into what was meant to have been a carefully manipulated, orchestrated victory for Viktor Yanukovych, a pro-Russian candidate directly supported by Putin himself, profoundly unnerved the Russians, especially since a similarly unruly protest movement

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in Georgia had brought a pro-European politician, Mikheil Saakashvili, to power the year before. Shaken by those two events, Putin put the bogeyman of "color revolution" at the center of Russian propaganda. Civic protest movements are always described as "color revolutions" in Russia and as the work of outsiders. Popular leaders are always said to be foreign puppets. Anticorruption and pro-democracy slogans are linked to chaos and instability. In 2011, a year of mass protest against a manipulated election in Russia itself, Putin evoked the Orange Revolution with real bitterness, describing it as a "well-tested scheme for destabilizing society" and accusing the Russian opposition of "transferring this practice to Russian soil," where he feared a similar popular uprising intended to remove him from power.

He was wrong; there was no "scheme" that was "transferred." Public discontent in Russia, like public discontent in China, simply had nowhere to express itself except through street protest. Putin's opponents had no legal means to remove him from power. Critics of the regime talk about democracy and human rights in Russia because it reflects their experience of injustice, and not only in Russia. The protests that led to democratic transitions in the Philippines, Taiwan, South Africa, South Korea, Myanmar, and Mexico; the "people's revolutions" that washed across central and Eastern Europe in 1989; the Arab Spring in 2011; and the Hong Kong protests of 2019–20 were all begun by people who had experienced injustice at the hands of the state.

This is the core of the problem: the leaders of Autocracy, Inc., know that the language of transparency, accountability,

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justice, and democracy will always appeal to some of their own citizens. To stay in power they must undermine those ideas, wherever they are found.

On February 24, 2022, Russia launched a full-scale war against Ukraine, the first full-scale kinetic battle in the struggle between Autocracy, Inc., and what might loosely be described as the democratic world. Russia plays a special role in the autocratic network, both as the inventor of the modern marriage of kleptocracy and dictatorship and as the country now most aggressively seeking to upend the status quo. The invasion was planned in that spirit. Putin hoped not only to acquire territory, but also to show the world that the old rules of international behavior no longer hold.

From the very first days of the war, Putin and the Russian security elite ostentatiously demonstrated their disdain for the language of human rights, their disregard for the laws of war, their scorn for international law and for treaties they themselves had signed. They arrested public officials and civic leaders: mayors, police officers, civil servants, school directors, journalists, artists, museum curators. They built torture chambers for civilians in most of the towns they occupied in southern and eastern Ukraine. They kidnapped thousands of children, ripping some away from their families, removing others from orphanages, gave them new "Russian" identities, and prevented them from returning home to Ukraine. They deliberately targeted emergency workers. Brushing aside the principles of territorial integrity that Rus-

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