

Reflections on World Politics #6

John A. Bernbaum

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The Threat We Face

When many of us were young in the 1940s and 1950s, the principal threats our country faced were from dictators whose fascist or Communist ideology directly challenged the United States and its democratic allies. World politics have dramatically changed since then, and many of us have failed to understand our current adversaries. A group of populist politicians have come to power around the world -- in many cases, using democratic elections to get there -- and then have either gradually or quickly subverted democracy by what analysts call "the autocrat's playbook."

Autocrats' Path to Power: As Moises Naim has pointed out, the tactics of these dictators are very similar. They use slogans that win them popular support by blaming elites for corruption and poor leadership, polarizing the political system by sweeping away any middle ground between themselves and their opponents, and expounding lies and half-truths to undermine checks and balances in government. This is happening worldwide, and it is unprecedented. These moves are followed by attacks on the free press. Autocrats get their cronies to buy media companies and convert them into propaganda machines. They use media to deceive and manipulate their people and to plant seeds of distrust for traditional state institutions. Autocrats use their controlled media to present themselves as defenders of the people -- as leaders who are courageously taking power away from corrupt elites. They gain traction and support from people who believe these lies and then become fervent fans.

What is particularly dangerous about these autocrats is that their regimes are not run by one "bad guy." As Anne Applebaum explains, these dictatorships comprise "sophisticated networks composed of kleptocratic financial services, security services (military, police, paramilitary groups, surveillance), and professional propagandists." These corrupt, state-controlled companies in different countries work with each other and share propaganda resources. They do not share an ideology, and no one person leads this group. Instead, they are united by their desire to hold and increase their personal power and wealth. Applebaum labels this group "Autocracy, Inc." -- an alliance built on making deals that involve stealing the wealth of their countries and parking these massive financial resources in banks in western Europe and the United States using shell corporations. They are willing to let their countries become "failed states" with collapsing economies and mass poverty, while they spend extraordinary amounts of money buying property in the West, building unbelievably luxurious yachts, and vacationing at the world's most expensive resorts.

Combatting Autocracy: When you look at these autocrats and how they have built protective security systems and compiled huge financial assets to support their criminal empires, they seem impossible to defeat. And as citizens in many western societies have increasingly lost their commitment to democracy and are paralyzed by polarized political strife, it is not clear whether they are willing to confront the new dictators, who in turn are finding support in a demoralized West.

Thoughtful analysts describe Putin's Russia as a "personalist autocracy," which means it is based on control by one person, and not a military cohort, political faction, or ideology. Regimes like this have numerous weaknesses, and it is helpful to understand this when our country responds to his aggressive actions. The first weakness is the vulnerability created by autocrats who undermine their country's state and private institutions – for example, courts, bureaucracies, legislatures, and media outlets. In a system like this, autocrats have no succession plan, and the principal options they face are exile, prison, or death. As a result, when dictators sense they are losing support, they take desperate steps. Putin appears to be making decisions by himself, and reports indicate that very few people have access to him. This is what happens when autocrats conclude that they are the smartest person in the room and the information they get from their cronies is designed to please them, not to tell the truth. Dictators appear all-powerful but are also very brittle.

Autocrats put their cronies into positions of authority – placing individuals who are neither competent nor particularly motivated in charge of major government departments and significant agencies. The individuals selected by Putin for these positions are people he thinks are incapable of engineering a coup against him. Stephen Kotkin points out: "Putin surrounds himself with people who are maybe not the sharpest tools in the drawer on purpose."

The second weakness is the inherent tension that the autocrat must somehow balance between satisfying the elites who support him and keeping the general population content. As we've seen in recent years, political elites can create coups and mass public protests can bring down dictators. This balance can be hard to maintain, especially if the stolen wealth of the elites starts to feel threatened by the dictator's risky actions, and the bodies of young soldiers begin piling up in Russia.

The third weakness is how autocrats handle repression. Research indicates that personalist autocracies are more likely to repress their populations than dictatorships run by a strong party or the military. Using coercion is not easy to administer, and it can be costly if overused. For Putin, his original popularity aided his growing power as president, but that popularity is in decline as the Russian economy stalls and the country becomes a pariah in the opinion of the rest of the world. How much repression and death of their sons will the Russian people tolerate? Putin is in trouble.

For further study of this topic, see:

- Anne Applebaum, "The Bad Guys are Winning," *The Atlantic* (December 21, 2021).
- Moises Naim, "The Dictator's New Playbook," *Foreign Affairs* (March-April 2022).
- Timothy Frye, *Weak Strongman: The Limits of Power in Putin's Russia* (2021).

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