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> 'Because it is not easy to recognise the enemy, the goal is achieved even if only five per cent of those killed are truly enemies.'
>
> Joseph Vissarionovich Stalin, 1938

After a long history of psychopathic, kleptocratic, sadistic, cruel, bloodthirsty, destructive, sometimes somewhat enlightened, and even benevolent dictators (fear not, the last exist only in economic theory, not in the real world), the reader now encounters innovative subspecies – the spin dictators. Do they actually exist? Who are they? What kind of dictators are these novels? What is their *modus operandi*? Why have they not existed in the past? This is just the beginning of the list of questions the authors of the book place on their agenda – not exactly a research agenda, since the book, as they point out, collates the insights that are based on the results of the theoretical and empirical research that they have already published in economics and political science academic journals.

The book is an attempt by Sergei Guriev (an economist, former head of Moscow's New Economic School, and former chief economist of the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, currently provost of the Paris Institute of Political Studies) and Daniel Treisman (a political scientist, professor at the University of California, Los Angeles) to explain the nature of the majority of current autocracies that the authors refer to as spin dictatorships. The role model for spin dictator for the authors is

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Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin,[1] followed by a lengthy line of leaders and countries from Hugo Chávez's Venezuela and Viktor Orbán's Hungary to Mahathir Mohamad's Malaysia and Nursultan Nazarbayev's Kazakhstan. 'We see all these rulers [i.e. spin dictators – remark of the reviewer] as converging on a novel – though not unprecedented – approach that can preserve autocracy for a while in even modern, globalized settings. The key to this is deception: most dictators today conceal their true nature. So the first step is to understand how they operate. In the chapters that follow, we explore why these regimes emerged, how they work, what threats they pose, and how the West can best resist them' (p. x). Well, quite a vow!

In the introductory chapter of the book, the authors set the benchmark for distinction between the new breed and the old-style dictators, traditional tyrants of the previous century. In the 20th century, 'most dictators maintained power by repressing any opposition, controlling all communications, punishing critics, (often) imposing an ideology, attacking the ideal of pluralist democracy, and blocking most cross-border flows of people and information. The key principle behind all these practices was simple: intimidation. The typical twentieth-century autocrat was a dictator of fear' (pp. 10–11). As examples of those dictators, the authors encourage the reader to think about the classic tyrants of the twentieth century – Adolf Hitler, Joseph Stalin, Mao Zedong – who were larger-than-life figures responsible for the deaths of millions. They controlled not only people's public behaviour but also their private lives, basically fulfilling a necessary condition for totalitarianism (Linz 2000). To do that, each created a disciplined party and brutal secret police. The authors point out that not every old-school dictator was a genocidal killer or the prophet of some utopian creed, but even the less bloodthirsty ones were experts in projecting fear. Terror was their all-purpose tool. That is the reason the authors designate old-style autocrats as fear dictators.

Contrary to them, spin dictators do not use fear but – spin. According to the authors, there are five basic rules for spin dictators. The first one is – be popular. Unlike classic despots, who could not care less about their popularity, spin dictators must care about their approval ratings. For twenty years, the authors point out, Putin's approval never dipped below 60 per

[1] Since the book was released on 5 April 2022, it is obvious that the manuscript was submitted well before the beginning of the war in Ukraine. With all developments in Russia since then, it is rather doubtful that Vladimir Putin has acted as a spin dictator since the beginning of the war. Massive repression against the media, political opponents and all the people who do not share his views on the war in Ukraine made him an old-style, traditional fear dictator. With his KGB background and Russian people from the political and business elite recurringly falling out of windows, one would say – a sinister dictator.

cent. The second rule is – use personal popularity to consolidate power. Popularity is a fluid asset that can fall as well as rise. So it makes sense for an autocrat, according to the authors, to invest that popularity into other levers of control. 'To cash in his high ratings, a spin dictator calls elections and referenda and, winning huge victories, claims a mandate to adjust political and legal institutions' (p. 17). The third rule is – pretend to be democratic. Nowadays public opinion globally favours democracy, hence a spin dictator pays lip service to democracy and pretends to embrace the vogue of freedom. The fewer people that see through their hypocrisy, the better for their popularity – a desirable outcome, according to rule number one.

Spin dictators open up to the world – that is the fourth rule. 'Occasionally, they restrict foreign media. But mostly they welcome flows of people, capital, and data and find ways to profit from them. They join international institutions and disrupt any missions that might be turned against them' (p. 17). They are members of international clubs, whatever the club may be and regardless of where the sessions take place – Davos, Switzerland, for example. Finally, the fifth and, according to the authors, the most important rule is – avoid violent repression, or at least conceal or camouflage it when used. In modern societies, brutal acts tend to discredit the leader. For a spin dictator, the authors point out, visible violence against the public is a mark of failure. In short, 'spin dictators manipulate information to boost their popularity with the general public and use that popularity to consolidate political control, all while pretending to be democratic, avoiding or at least camouflaging violent repression, and integrating their countries with the outside world' (p. 18). A handy table is provided in the book as a kind of the reader's guide to distinguishing between fear and spin dictators. For the record, the authors classify a leader as a spin dictator 'if under his rule all the following are true: (a) the country is a nondemocracy, *and* (b) national elections are held in which at least one opposition party is allowed to run, *and* (c) at least a few media outlets criticize the government each year, *and* (d) fewer than 10 state political killings occur each year on average, *and* (e) fewer than 1,000 political prisoners are held in any year' (p. 20, italic in original).

Now that the reader knows how to distinguish between the two types of autocracy and how to recognize a spin dictator, with some evidence about surging spin dictatorships around the world in the last few decades, with the decline of fear dictatorships provided, in Part I ('How It's Done') the book turns to the analysis of how spin dictatorship is achieved. Chapter 2 ('Discipline, But Don't Punish') starts with a story about the pioneer of the new breed of dictators – Singapore's Lee Kuan Yew, who saw the authorities' futile repression of the student movement back in September 1956 and

realized that the operation was not effective. Lee believed the real battle was for the hearts and minds of the governed. Throughout his political career, his goal was to sustain public support and marginalize the opposition, without open repression. Nonetheless, harassment is a part of the game, and it should be presented to the public as if absolutely not on political grounds. Hence, the first thing to do is to arrest dissidents for non-political crimes, whichever the crime is fabricated. 'Find him something' is a standing order. The officials in spin dictatorships provide a long-doctored list of non-political crimes. 'Inventiveness and creativity' is the motto of the actions of the spin dictators, as they find crimes that are not just non-political but disreputable. Sex offences have worked well, the authors point out, especially when primed by rumours. Who cares about evidence and truth, the only important feature is that there is no visible political connotation on the surface. Revolving door detention is another principle. The person who is detained on fabricated indictments for non-political crimes should not be incarcerated for a long time, as martyrs should not be fabricated. Nonetheless, as soon as a political detainee is released, a new indictment is fabricated. Following sex offences, perhaps tax fraud will do. Bankrupting the opposition with fines is another tool. No criminal proceedings, God forbid on political grounds, just civil and administrative procedures with recurring fines, decreasing the budgets of free media and opposition parties. No banning of opposition activities, just regulations and restrictions, to decrease the political impact of opposition efforts. It is always good to accuse the opposition of violence, especially against helpless special police forces armed only to the teeth. Then, dirty jobs are privatised, and subcontracted to private operators, so no blame can be allocated to a spin dictator. Finally, the Internet offers unprecedented opportunities for slandering activists and sowing distrust within the opposition networks. Anonymous posts can accuse them of being state agents. The entire repertoire of spin dictators aims to discipline rather than to punish the opposition, those with ideas to run for office instead the incumbent dictator. Punishing was the old style, i.e. fear dictators' course of action. Fear is not fashionable anymore.[2]

[2] This is not to say that old-style dictators, unscrupulous tyrants do not operate any more. With the hanging spree of the Iranian Islamic government, journalist killings by Mohamad Bin Salman (MBS) of Saudi Arabia, perhaps the worst tyrant in the world these days, and, so far, business-friendly but liberty ultimately unfriendly, Xi Jinping, starting his third mandate as the head of the Chinese Communist Party, fear dictators demonstrate their viability, although there are not as widespread as in the heydays of Hitler, Stalin and Mao Zedong, and their repression accomplishments are much more modest. As to the giants of repression, not all of them behave irrationally (Gregory, Schröder, Sonin 2011), with some of them with exceptional risk aversion, recognisable from the quote at the beginning of this review.

Chapter 3 ('Postmodern Propaganda') starts with a review of traits of propaganda in a fear dictatorship. It is open, direct, and leaves no room for second thoughts. As the authors point out: 'The main message propaganda sent was simple: "Be obedient, or else!" The subtext: "We are tough!" The style was usually literal and direct. There was little of the humor, irony, and double meanings that pervade much modern political advertising' (pp. 66–67). Propaganda helped make repression more effective. For fear dictators, propaganda was not an alternative to violence: the two worked together.

Contrary to that, spin dictators have a set of rules for propaganda. First of all, instead of fear, project an image of a competent leader. The essential goal is to replace the rhetoric of violence with one of performance. Rather than terrify citizens, the authors point out, spin dictators bid for their support with a show of leadership skill and dedication. The new line seems to be: 'Look what a great job we're doing!' Forget uniforms, however fancy they may have been, and tunics. Well-pressed business suits suggest professionalism and modernity. 'Spin dictators evoke peace and prosperity. Instead of demanding blood and sacrifice, they offer comfort and respect' (pp. 74–75), especially if the price of oil on the world market soared, something that Vladimir Putin welcomed to no end in his first decade in power. The second feature of the spin dictators' propaganda, the authors point out, is that they do not have an ideology but 'a kaleidoscope of appeals' – a mix of images and themes to target multiple audiences at once. Vladimir Putin, for example, according to a Kremlin insider, 'hates the word ideology' (Taylor 2018, 9). The authors emphasise that the incumbent Russian leader blends imperial history, communist tropes, and conservative traditionalism in what was rather early in Putin's leadership career described in the literature as 'a Molotov cocktail of French postmodernism and KGB instrumentalism' (Krastev 2006, 58). The third standing propaganda order for spin dictators is cultivate celebrity – instead of cult of personality. The authors specify that celebrity, by contrast to the personality cult, is mostly decentralized, often spontaneously constructed, and exploited by private actors for profit. 'With this in mind, consider Putin. Many have marveled at the flood of themed paraphernalia – from matryoshkas, T-shirts, vodka, and cologne to iPhone cases, chocolates, and calendars – that appeared early in his first presidency' (p. 77). The sarcastic conclusion is '[i]f Stalin was a god, Putin has become a trademark' (p. 78).[3]

[3] Actually, it is not so different from former US President Barack Obama, the authors emphasise, as he too inspired a catalogue of themed merchandise – from wooden eggs to bobble-head dolls, refrigerator magnets, jigsaw puzzles, travel mugs, cocktail glasses, cat collars, nail polish, and even spatulas.

The fourth wisdom of spin dictators' is – borrow credibility. They allow some nominally independent press and sometimes even television. They tolerate limited criticism. This allows them, when needed, to exploit the reputation of non-state outlets for their purposes. By channelling messages through such media, they borrow credibility. According to the authors, a second way to borrow credibility is to conceal the source of propaganda. The Internet made this much easier. Propagandists could hire 'trolls' or 'keyboard warriors' to pass as ordinary citizens and infiltrate online conversations.

Weaponizing entertainment is another avenue of propaganda, but much more important is the framing and interpreting information. Interpreting facts – not straightforward lying – is particularly important, as some realities are difficult to conceal or deny, and a news source that attempts to do so may just lose its audience. Explaining them away is another matter. Empirical research (Rozenas, Stukal 2019) found that both 'good' and 'bad' economic facts were reported accurately on the Russian main TV station (Chanel One). What made the difference was the assignment of credit or blame. 'Good' news was attributed to the Kremlin's expert management, and 'bad' news to external forces such as global financial markets or foreign governments. Besides redirecting blame for inferior performance, the authors claim that spin dictators who cannot conceal bad news try to convince the public that any alternative leader would have done worse.

Chapter 4 ('Sensible Censorship') provides another distinction between fear and spin dictators. 'For most of the twentieth century, the censor's pencil – typically a blue one – was almost as important to dictators as the AK47 [Soviet mass produced and a widespread automatic assault rifle – remark by the reviewer]' (p. 88). Censorship was comprehensive – in ambition, if not always in results.[4] All public communication had to be sanitised.[5] In addition to being comprehensive, under old-school dictators the process was quite public. Censorship was not just a way to block messages: it was itself a message, according to the authors. And the message itself was often violent and openly so – the censorship of fear dictators aimed to demoralize and deter.

[4] Stupidity and ignorance can be counterproductive. According to the authors, Pinochet closed down Chile's left-wing media and posted censors in all newspapers, magazines, radio stations, and television channels. His soldiers raided bookstores. In one case, they impounded artworks on Cubism for fear they might be promoting Fidel Castro's revolution.

[5] The authors point out that not only was the manuscript of Vasily Grossman's epic novel *Life and Fate* seized, but the KGB even confiscated the carbon paper and typewriter ribbons he had used to write it. *Sicher ist sicher*!

Alberto Fujimori of Peru, who was described by the author as a trailblazer of the novel approach to censorship, aimed at controlling the media, as one controls the ratings. And by controlling the ratings, one controlled politics. The techniques invented by spin dictators like Fujimori turned the old censorship of fear on its head. 'Where fear dictators sought comprehensive power, the new approach was deliberately partial. In the modern global economy, a complete information monopoly meant settling for backwardness' (p. 93). In fact, the authors conclude, a token opposition media could be useful. It showed that the regime was confident in its appeal. It could be held up to the West – and domestic critics – as proof that the authorities respected the freedom of the press.

Furthermore, overt censorship would suggest that the government had something to hide and might send people searching for the missing information. Concealing something can, perversely, increase awareness of it. The authors refer to that phenomenon as the Streisand effect: when the American singer tried to stop a little-known website from posting pictures of her Malibu home, the scandal itself attracted thousands of viewers. 'The book that is suppressed today gets twice as much attention tomorrow, wrote South African novelist and Nobel prize winner J. M. Coetzee. There is no evidence that spin dictators are avid readers of Coetzee's novels (although it is reasonable to assume that some of them would adore Colonel Joll, a character from *Waiting for Barbarians*), but definitely their political instinct concurs with his insights about censorship.[6] Just as public violence creates martyrs, public censorship creates the interest of the people – something that should be avoided in the mind of spin dictators.

One of their powerful weapons, instead of censorship, is to sue journalists for libel or defamation. This ties the victims up in court proceedings and burdens them with crippling fines – or even short jail spells where criminal penalties apply. No doubt it has a substantial deterrent effect, something that goes well for spin dictators.[7] Short of such suits, spin dictators harass critical

[6] Perhaps this is an explanation why books that openly mock Putin himself (*iPhuck 10* by Victor Pelevin), or his regime (*The Sugar Kremlin* by Vladimir Sorokin) have not been censored in Russia. On the contrary, they have received literary accolades and have been translated into other languages. Both writers have been celebrated as leading contemporary Russian literary authors. All these insights refer to the time before the war in Ukraine.

[7] For example, Ecuador's Rafael Correa, according to the authors, charged four journalists from the daily *El Universo* with criminal defamation for referring to him as a 'dictator'. After a trial that lasted less than twenty-four hours, the judge sentenced each journalist to three years in prison and fined the newspaper 40 million USD.

media with enforcement actions and regulatory fines, usually for ostensibly not paying taxes. Another even subtler tactic is to camouflage interventions as the operation of free markets, for example, a free decision by private companies in the market to halt business cooperation, like when Russian private cable providers suddenly cancelled contracts with the program producer who had angered the Kremlin. There is always payback time for these companies. In addition to all that, the way to neutralize hostile media messages is to discredit the source; tabloids with perhaps little help from the friends of the spin dictator, usually those in charge of defamation, are eager, due to substantial compensation, to publish fake information about the sources.

The title of Chapter 5 ('Democracy for Dictators') could be *prima facie* puzzling. Dictatorship rejects democracy, so why on Earth do dictators need democracy? Well, old-style dictators have had a quite peculiar way of considering democracy's basic notion: the rule of the people. According to the authors, the attitude of the old-style despots was that democracy required a dictator to discern the people's 'true' will – and impose it on them. How about the new breed – spin dictators? In short, they use polls and ballots to entrench themselves in power, hence the institutional framework they operate in should be labelled as competitive authoritarianism (Linz, Way 2010).

Spin dictators claim to be committed to democracy. This is not only lip service. Their power depends on their popularity. So they monitor it closely. 'Unlike old-school autocrats, who at most dabbled in sociology, the new one's pore over polling data. Each week, for instance, Putin's Kremlin commissions broad-ranging, national surveys from two firms. It periodically adds regionally representative surveys and secret polls on particular topics. At the same time, the Kremlin's security agency, the FSO (*Federalnaya Sluzhba Okhrany* – Federal Guards Service), conducts its own heterodox soundings of public opinion – roughly five hundred a year, some with as many as fifty thousand respondents' (p. 125). With monitoring popularity and heavily investing in its increase or just maintaining, it is not surprising that elections recurrently take place in competitive authoritarianism. What is surprising, nonetheless, is that they are fixed. After all, with soaring popularity, primarily due to well-organised propaganda, the outcome of the elections should not be a problem. 'With their high ratings, these leaders could have won elections honestly. And yet, they almost always chose to do so with an element of fraud, sometimes barely hidden. This has puzzled observers. It seems perverse' (p. 128).

After dismissing several hypotheses (some of them rather convincing to the reader, such as the one that dictators commit fraud – and do so blatantly – to demoralize potential challengers), the authors offer several explanations,

none of them compelling. They suggest that inflated margins due to election fraud help incumbents monopolise power, as they may provide the supermajority needed for constitutional amendments. But that contradicts the insight of the authors that spin dictators, for PR purposes, do not desire vast majorities in the parliament, as they purport to be democrats. 'A second reason is more paradoxical: even if believed to be partly fraudulent, large victories can still increase the incumbent's legitimacy' (p. 130). The reader fully agrees that the reason is paradoxical, but the authors do not provide a convincing explanation of the paradox. The authors' insight that signs of cheating may not undermine the incumbents' claims to be democratic because many citizens in autocracies believe that fraud is common in democracies too, although plausible, is hardly a convincing explanation of the massive and open election fraud in spin dictatorships.

Chapter 6 ('Global Pillage') deals with the relations of the spin dictators with the world, and it starts with a story about the global reach of one fear dictator that could be labelled as a forerunner of the spin dictators – Yugoslavia's Josip Broz, known to many as Tito. Although by a substantial number of traits a fear dictator, with political repression against any political opposition,[8] he was a half-breed: an international celebrity, letting people freely leave the country and travel abroad, letting international press come in, everything save political pluralism and undermining of his cult of personality. And he was enormously popular. The reader finds some seeds for the spin dictators in Tito's political manners.[9]

The classical fear dictators were afraid of anything that was not within their realms and their control, hence isolation was key. The new breed of dictators is quite distinctive in this respect: they embrace international travel, in and out of their countries. They do not block international media. 'Spin dictators treat foreign media much as they do domestic publications.

[8] Although the repression in the first years of his rule, even after breaking with Stalin, was substantial, with Gulags on the seaside, after some time the repression in Tito's Yugoslavia become a bit softer. After expelling one of his arch-rivals within the Yugoslav Communist Party and the political head of the secret police, Aleksandar Ranković in 1966, Tito just retired Ranković and left him alone with all pensioner's remunerations and People Hero's honours in his villa located in a posh area of Belgrade. As pointed out by Kershaw (2022), that would not have been possible in the case of Stalin and his party cleansing, especially considering that the main (political) culprit was the head of the secret police.

[9] These manners have nothing to do with the catastrophic failure of his political projects – federal Yugoslavia and the 'brotherhood and unity' of Yugoslav ethnic groups. Both collapsed with massive violence and long causality list just ten years after Tito's death, because there were ill-founded, and political liberalisation just disclosed how shallow the foundations of these projects were.

They usually tolerate those that appeal only to the intellectual fringe' (p. 146). Furthermore, they have foreign assistants, most of them from democratic countries. According to the authors, spin dictators collect foreign endorsements for their political accomplishments (whatever they may be) and display them proudly to their citizens. Another way to show the world's respect is by hosting summits. Vladimir Putin 'spent almost $400 million chairing the 2006 G8 meeting in St. Petersburg' (p. 148). It is also helpful for spin dictators to get public endorsement from internationally recognised experts, for example, Nobel Prize winners in economics, like Finn Kydland and Robert Mundell, acknowledging in 2010 the wisdom of the economic policy of Kazakhstan's Nursultan Nazarbayev. Endorsement from celebrities is also relevant, so spin dictators skilfully cultivate and harvest such relationships. It was Marilyn Monroe that attended the birthday party of JFK, then US President, on 19 May 1962, but it was Hilary Swank who attended a ceremony to mark the 35th birthday of Vladimir Putin's Chechen henchman Ramzan Kadyrov in Grozny, on 5 October 2011 – 'Happy Birthday to you, Mr. Henchmen!'.

Foreign election observers are obligatory for spin dictators, but they may be misled by sophisticated deception. Even more sophisticated is the creation of international groups of observers, usually with some official-sounding names and international membership, but effectively PR activist groups for spin dictators. And dissidents are arrested abroad for 'non-political' offences, naturally on trump-up charges. The obvious abuse of Interpol 'Red Notice' has been recurrent in the past several decades. According to the authors, spin dictators participate in Western institutions in order to extract benefits, exploiting the design flaws and weaknesses of these bodies. They trade with Western countries while denouncing them. 'They recruit networks of corrupt partners in the West, simultaneously pursuing concrete goals and eroding Western cohesion' (p. 152).

Spin dictators shape not only domestic but also global opinion. Most of them are aware that Western political elites would like to remove them. But leaders in democracies are dependent on their citizens and their opinions, so it is prudent to invest resources in shaping that opinion. 'A second option, almost as effective, is to turn Western publics against their own governing elites – in particular, those tempted by foreign military action. That means supporting anti-elite movements. Russia's Putin has become the guardian angel of right-wing populists across Europe, providing moral and sometimes financial support' (p. 157). Own global TV channels sending a global message and competing with the likes of the BBC and CNN, and modelled after them, such as RT (formerly Russia Today) cannot harm this endeavour. Consultants also come from the West: for example, Kazakhstan's president Nazarbayev

hired former British Prime Minister Tony Blair to advise him on handling the press. Spin dictators are not isolated at all, and democratic countries – or rather individuals from political and not only political elites from them – are to be credited for that lack of isolation. Job very well done!

Part II of the book ('Why It's Happening and What to Do About It') compresses into only two chapters the answers to two crucial issues: the origin of the spin dictators' phenomenon and the policies towards them that should be applied. This is a strange disbalance between the phenomenology of spin dictatorships in the (much bigger) first part of the book, on the one side, and its understanding (its origins) and recommended actions, on the other. It is as if the authors' priority is to demonstrate that spin dictators really exist and that should be no second thoughts about their advent. After they did that job, the reader expects at the least the same effort in the explanation of the origin and recommendation of policies. Alas, the effort is reduced to two chapters only.

Chapter 7 ('The Modernization Cocktail') deals with the question of the origin of spin dictators: what triggered the shift in the forms of autocracy? According to the authors, the answer lies in a cocktail of interconnected forces related to economic and social modernisation, combined with globalization. They call this the 'modernization cocktail'. It makes life harder for violent dictatorships and nudges some of them into democracy. But others find ways to adapt and survive, substituting deception and manipulation for terror. 'The modernization cocktail has three ingredients: the shift from industrial to postindustrial society, the globalization of economies and information, and the rise of a liberal international order. The end of the Cold War – itself partly a result of these forces – catalyzed the process' (p. 170).

The cocktail, according to the authors, works both within countries and at the international level. The first segment of the cocktail is a shift to post-industrial society. This shift to service industries is indisputable, but its pace and the achieved level differ greatly from nation to nation – there is a general shift, but countries are affected in vastly different ways. Furthermore, the authors' claim that the growing service sector demanded ever more creativity is a bit puzzling, because many service industries are based on low-skill labour with repetitive tasks, and it is manufacturing industries that record more technological progress and innovation than services. The authors claim that once progress required imagination, Stalin-style coercion no longer worked. 'You could not order people to have ideas' (p. 173). Be that as it may, there was much more innovation in Stalin's Russia than in Putin's. After all, in the time of Stalin's somewhat softer (but still first-rate fear dictators) successors, Russia (Soviet Union) led in the Space Race, hence achieving unprecedented success in aerospace, a rather innovative industry.

Furthermore, the authors claim that the shift towards services creates a need for a highly educated workforce, which is not suitable for fear dictatorship. They suggest that a college-educated, politically savvy segment of society sees through the dictator's lies and opposes him. But the authors emphasise that a skilled spin dictator's manipulations secure him support among the general, not-so-well-educated public.

Nonetheless, throughout the book the authors also point out the exceptionally large share of college-educated people in the population of the Soviet Union – neither a service industry country, nor a spin, but rather a fear dictatorship. Furthermore, a high share of educated people in Russia goes well with one of the most remarkable and dangerous spin dictatorships (although it is only spin one these days) in the world. Yes, social values have changed – a point well taken by the author – as they have been changing throughout the history of human civilisation, but again it is difficult to see the link between the social values change and service industries. New information technologies indeed make it more likely for opponents of the regime to establish links among themself and more difficult for dictators to isolate them, but it is difficult for the reader to associate this change with the advent of post-industrial society. In short, the first component of the modernisation cocktail as the explanation for the advent of spin dictatorships is not convincing.

The second element in the modernisation cocktail, according to the authors, is the economic and informational globalisation. This reasoning is rather intuitive, and it is hard to deny both globalisations. Nonetheless, the authors did not provide the basic theory, i.e. the theoretical hypothesis on the causality link from globalisation to spin dictatorships; rather they deliver only a single case as anecdotal evidence – the transformation of the regime of the former Mexican president 'Salinas's regime, already halfway from fear to spin dictatorship, was pushed into a low-violence strategy. What made the difference was the combination of Internet communications, global news media, and financial vulnerability produced by the country's rapid integration into global capital markets' (p. 183). Well, if single country cases are counted (obvious *par pro toto* reasoning error) it did not work in the case of China, the reader concludes. The authors do not provide insights on in which conditions and for what reasons globalisation works for spin dictatorships and in which it does not.

According to the authors, the third ingredient of the modernisation cocktail is the rise of the liberal international order. 'An important driver of this was the emergence of a global movement for human rights. From around the world, small groups of educated professionals with progressive values and often legal training linked up in the late twentieth century into a

network of liberal NGOs' (p. 183). Besides public opinion and law, according to the authors, international business has also been influenced by human rights activism. For dictators, all this has made overt repression riskier. Brutal violence might discourage investors. Violence and undemocratic behaviour tend to be costlier than before, especially when compared to the Cold War era, for dictators who were 'on the right side'. The insight is true, but it is rather trivial. What is missing is an explanation of why this cocktail ingredient, as well as the whole cocktail, works in diverse ways in different situations. In some cases, the cocktail turned fear dictatorships into democracies, in other cases into spin dictatorships, and in some other cases, there has been no change at all. The reader does not know why, because there is no information whatsoever about the preconditions for each of these outcomes. The authors provide no theory, no theoretical model, no matter how unsophisticated, that would offer information about the causalities and mechanism of change, and which could predict the change of political institutions, depending on the identified factors. The reader concludes that it is basically guesswork, more or less informed.[10] That is hardly an accomplishment for academic literature.

Chapter 8 title ('The Future of Spin') is somewhat misleading because the most important part of this chapter is about policy recommendations to the liberal West regarding spin dictators. It starts with the insight that '[t]oday's nativist populism – in both West and East – unites the economic resentment and obsolescent values of those hurt by the postindustrial transition' (p. 205). So the reader concludes that this can be the wind in the sails of spin dictators. Also, the authors identify the main weakness of spin dictators. 'Focused on personal power and self-interest, today's dictators have trouble forming solid alliances. Stalin forged a stable bloc based on shared ideology. Current autocrats can collaborate with each other on specific projects. But their loyalties realign as new opportunities emerge' (p. 206). The crucial question is, at least for the reader, how that weakness should be exploited.

[10] The theoretical contribution (Acemoglu, Robinson 2006) proved quite a developed theoretical model regarding causalities regarding the outcomes of political institutions, which predicts the conditions under which dictatorship will turn into a democracy. The authors mention this contribution only in one sentence in a footnote, not related to the origins of the spin dictatorships, but in the debate about whether an increase in income is favourable to the advent of democracy. The authors subscribe to the thesis of the favourable effect of an increase in income on democracy (Treisman 2020), contrary to the empirical findings (Acemoglu *et al.* 2008). There is empirical evidence, though, about the favourable effects of democracy on economic growth and income (Acemoglu *et al.* 2019).

Before stepping on the ground of recommendations, the authors describe Western international policy since the end of the Cold War. There has been, according to the authors, some version of George Kennan's containment policies, but the containment was not so tight as during the Cold War. Development assistance and (economic and political integration) to spur modernisation as the way out of dictatorship was praised by the authors, who just a few pages before referred to modernisation as the cause of spin dictators as an evolutionary process from fear dictators. Furthermore, the authors claim that Western leaders did not foresee how integration would affect their societies. 'Greater integration made the East more like the West. It also made the West more like the East' (p. 209). Be that as it may, the reader wonders what it has to do with spin dictators and the recommendations of policies towards them.

For the authors, integration should continue. 'But the West needs to devise a smarter version of integration. What would that look like? We suggest an approach of adversarial engagement. The West must continue to engage. But it should not expect integration to automatically disempower dictators and render them cooperative. Rather, the West should use the leverage of an interconnected world to defend its interests and nudge dictatorships toward free government. The catch is that dictatorships will be doing the same in reverse' (p. 210). The reader is hardly any wiser for such a policy recommendation.

Nonetheless, there are a few specific recommendations – principles of engagement, according to the authors. The first is to be more watchful. In the past thirty years, spin dictators have slipped under the radar by imitating democracy. The second principle is to welcome modernisation, as they point out, even in our adversaries. The reader would perhaps add – especially in them. 'So, although economic sanctions may be necessary at times, they should be targeted and narrow, aimed at individuals and firms. They should not seek to prevent modernization or isolate whole countries from world markets' (p. 211). Two short comments on these insights. First, necessary for what? For imposing democracy? Either you guys will make your country democratic, or we will impose sanctions on you.[11] Consider yourself fortunate not to be bombed! Second, targeted sanctions are completely ineffective (Demarais, 2022). It is the suffering of the people that creates incentives for the political elite to comply with a given request from the West.

[11] This is exactly the content of the 1992 US Cuban Democracy Act, which stipulates that the comprehensive sanctions will be waived only if democratic political institutions are introduced and effectively implemented in Cuba.

A third principle is to 'put our own house in order. Spin dictatorships exploit the vulnerabilities of democracies and try to create new ones' (p. 212). The first recommendation is that '[a]nti-trust has to be nimble and attentive to global political factors as well as market conditions' (p. 212). Poor antitrust: it is supposed to deal not only with Facebook and Google but also with all the other evils of the modern world. That is too much even for Lina Kahn, the over-aspiring, arrogant and too-ambitious head of the Federal Trade Commission. Senator John Sherman, whose bill became the first antitrust statute in the world in 1890, must be turning in his grave.

'Most important of all, the West needs to put its political house in order, repairing government institutions and restoring confidence in them' (p. 213). Finally, a sensible recommendation. Nonetheless, it is easier said than done, with the genie of populism released from the lamp, with Donald Trump being a serious candidate for the US 2024 presidential elections, and with excellence being forgotten as a virtue of the Western political elite. It seems that this crucial principle, establishing the West as a role model from the high moral grounds, will hardly be achievable in due course. Nonetheless, it is good to always keep this principle in mind.

The fourth orienting principle is to defend and reform the institutions of the liberal world order. An example is given: 'NATO must also change from a body focused almost entirely on military threats – although those remain – to one defending against the full spectrum of attacks today's dictators favor. Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty could be amended or interpreted to include collective defense against cyber-interference in the elections of any member country' (p. 215). The reader can imagine what kind of a mess the implementation of this recommendation would create. How about something simpler? Perhaps NATO should stop violating its own charter as it did with the military action against FR Yugoslavia in 1999. That would increase its credibility in the alliance's purely defensive military tasks.

The fifth and final principle recommended by the authors is rather surprising: 'support democracy democratically'. Is it really necessary to spell this out? The reader *prima facie* assumes that it goes without saying. But then, with a long history of Western nation-building and democracy-imposing programs, it is evident that this recommendation is actually desperately needed. Many decision-makers from the Western political elite disregard that democracy building is a bottom-up process, with disenfranchised groups boldly fighting for their own rights and that it is inevitably an indigenous political endeavour. No one brought democracy to the West. Acquiring it was a slow and painful process. That is the reason why democracy is so viable in the West. This is also the reason for the hasty Western retreat from Kabul in 2021, leaving the country to the Taliban. Afghanistan is simply not ripe

for democracy and universal human rights in this decade – perhaps in this century or more. One way or the other, it is for the Afghans to make their decision when actually the country is ripe for it. With deeds, not words. And there is extraordinarily little the West can do about it. Perhaps to 'support democracy democratically'.

The concluding chapter of the book is written in accordance with the modern liberal internationalism *dictum* of intervention, by any means available, in every case when democracy does not exist. Perhaps this is a reminiscence of Woodrow Wilson's old thesis in the aftermath of the Great War that democracy brings peace to the world. There are two problems with this approach – bringing democracy for the sake of peace. The first one is, as pointed out in the previous paragraph, building democracy is a bottom-up process and it depends on indigenous political players, not the Western political elite's thinking. The second problem is that, as the authors themselves point out, spin dictators do not go to war and modern wars are between democracies and old-style dictatorships. Accordingly, turning spin dictatorship into a democracy would not make the world a safer place.

The book is written in a clear and understandable style, focusing only on the main points (although with substantial references for anyone interested in more details, as the book is based on many academic contributions), with numerous examples and anecdotal evidence, making it a joyful ride. It is a very readable piece and there is no need for any prerequisite knowledge, save general education, to follow the insight and arguments of the authors. The reader does not have to be a specialist in spin dictators, whatever a specialist in that area may be.

There is a 'checking the evidence' section in every chapter, providing some empirical support for the theses disclosed in the chapter. However, checking the evidence section is strangely missing from the last two and the most important chapters, or at least should be the most important chapter: the one about the origins of spin dictatorships and the other about policies towards them. It speaks for itself. Furthermore, the book is not very well edited, so some of the insights are unnecessarily repeated throughout the book and the authors contradict themselves from time to time. In addition to contradictions already mentioned in this review, in one section of the book they refer to modern centrally controlled mass media as a crucial source of information, in the other they stress decentralised social media that cannot be controlled as such a source.

After finishing the book, the reader wonders whether 'spin dictators' is actually the most precise term. For years, the very notion of a dictator has intrinsically been linked to wholesale oppression and terror. So one could

even conclude that 'spin dictator' is an oxymoron. Of course, it is about autocrats, but not every autocrat is necessarily a dictator.[12] Nonetheless, this debate seems like splitting hairs. The authors obviously selected the term spin dictators rather than spin autocrats because the former is more colourful and captivating for the reader. Some criminal law scholars argued that the title of the perhaps most popular Dostoevsky novel is not precise and that from the standpoint of criminal law doctrine – it should be *Violation of the Penal Code and Sanction*. The entire world is grateful that Fyodor Mikhailovich did not consult these legal theorists before submitting the manuscript to the publisher, so fortunately for the readers, he selected the title *Crime and Punishment*. This is not to say that this book will accomplish similar fame, not even close to it, but the title should not be a problem for any well-meaning reader – spin dictator is an appropriate term.

A question for the end of the review: Can this book be harmful? After all, with its clear style and with a lot of substance, this is effectively a textbook, almost a manual, if not for spin dictators, then for spin dictators' candidates. Obviously, this was not the intention of the authors, but there are so many tricks of the trade explained in detail in the book, as they have immersed deep in the tradecraft of the spin dictators. It seems that this fear of producing a freedom harmful manual is not well founded, because spin dictators hardly read books, although some of them publicly, without providing evidence, for PR purposes, claim so. They read reports on the surveys of public opinion, focus group reports and, of course, detailed accounts from their secret security apparatus about the activities of the political opponents and the mood of the masses. They rely on personal contacts with their peers for a private exchange of experience. Furthermore, they innovate and adjust to new situations. In that process, they have immense support of the services of extremely well-paid (whatever the source of that remuneration is) professionals: former senior officials from Western counties, including former prime ministers, talented political consultants, imaginative public opinion experts, knowledgeable spin doctors, all the exceptional people who know what they are doing and why they are doing it. And the list of those who are ready to step in for a hefty remuneration is long. Awfully long! Spin dictators, incumbent or future, just do not need to read a book like this one. Nonetheless, the book should be a rather reasonable choice for those who would only like to acquire the skills of spotting a dictatorship when it is dressed in a democratic new suit.

[12] In their academic article about the topic, the authors use the term 'autocrat' (Guriev, Treisman 2019).

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