

Commissioned Book Review

Spin Dictators: The Changing Face of Tyranny in the 21st Century, by **Sergei Guriev and Daniel Treisman**. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2022. 360 pp., £25.00, ISBN: 9780691211411

Looking back at the history of the twentieth century, one of the most remarkable images in the political domain is dictatorships. Why does the world observe much less of them now? Was the exhibited almightiness by a dictator just a delusion? Or have they evolved in a different masked form? A new book – *Spin Dictators: The Changing Face of Tyranny in the 21st Century* – by Sergei Guriev, Professor of Economics and Provost at Paris Institute of Political Studies (also known as Sciences Po Paris), and Daniel Treisman, Professor of Political Science at University of California, Los Angeles, answers these questions.

Following the phraseme of spin doctors (or political technologists) – whose job is to frame and favourably interpret the facts – authors come up with a neologism: ‘spin dictators’, probably the most outstanding global political phenomenon of recent days. Spin dictators or manipulative dictators are essentially different from ‘classical’ dictators (the ones a reader might think of instantly hearing the word ‘dictators’) as Stalin, Hitler, Mao and the like. The regimes of the latter were ruled through fear: making violence public and aiming to expose all their citizens to it, fear dictators used official ideology with obligatory loyalty rituals and propaganda to strengthen their power. Usually, they tend to physically eliminate their opponents, both personalities (political rivals and opinion leaders) and sources of information (from

newspapers and radio to fiction books and even academic music). In many cases, the idea of democracy was a subject of derision, especially when it was opposed to the new-born political system (Maoism, Mobutuism, Ba’athism, etc.).

In contrast to that, spin dictators (e.g. Putin, Nazarbayev, Chavez, Correa,) ground their power on information manipulations and deceptions. Wanting to be perceived as successful, popular and competent leaders, they avoid explicit violence. Using much more sophisticated (than in classical dictatorships) propaganda and malleable legal enforcement, they conceal political harassment – they are causing independent mass media, *real* opposition, anticorruption and human-rights nongovernmental organisations (NGOs) – under the surface of non-political reasons (which commonly are fictitious charges and prosecution on tax evasion, money laundering, corruption, etc.). Instead of their historical-predecessors attitude towards democracy, spin dictators try to mimic it as much as possible: setting (allegedly) competitive elections, allowing some opposition mass media and having many other from-the-outside-resembling democratic practices.

Guriev and Treisman start by capturing the peculiar metamorphose of twentieth-century tyrants to regimes with a lower level of violence (with fewer political killings or political prisoners), the existence of which is thoroughly disguised in the public domain. Proceeding with the analysis of (post-)modern propaganda and implicit censorship, the authors show how contemporary dictators exploit democracy in such a way that does not threaten their presence in the power but gives the image of ‘democracy club’ members concealing

both local and abroad general public. The final chapter is the only normative one regarding possible actions against spin dictators. What can turn spin dictatorships into democracies on a global-world scale?

Standing in a row of such books as *Nothing Is True and Everything Is Possible* by Pomerantsev (2017 [2014]), *Enlightenment Now* by Pinker (2018) and *The Age of the Strongman* by Rachman (2022), *Spin Dictators* show how postindustrial transition, economic and informational globalisation, and rise of a liberal international order lead to less violence, more educated society and thus brings it closer to the pro-democratic transition. Beginning with the micro-level, Guriev and Treisman suggest local initiatives to be realised: from academicians and journalists (who can reveal the informational manipulations and investigate crimes) to lawyers and policymakers (who should work on new legal restrictions to make lobbying spin-dictators' interests impossible). Globally, the authors suggest adversarial engagement: providing and welcoming higher economic integration accompanied by the strong upholding of democratic values. Though in general, this increases the likelihood of democratisation, such an approach may be quite toxic in exceptional cases (as with Putin). This might lead to a necessity to develop a different strategy towards those dictators who are turning from manipulation back to fear.

In light of the ongoing, launched by Russia, war against Ukraine, the latter is of extreme urgency. What should be the most efficient response reaction towards those spin dictators who (rather exceptionally but then potentially even more harmfully) at some point have begun moving towards their predecessors, dictators of fear? Should a massive package of sanctions be imposed on the dictator's economy preventively? Would this soften the impending (military) blow or would it be too late to mitigate the beneficial effects of modernization that have been accumulating for decades? And, finally and specifically, were the most

advanced economies supporting the democratisation of Russia according to the modernization cocktail theory or were they sponsoring Putin's war in the long run? Tackling these questions in the book (now, perhaps, in the revised edition) would be of great relevance for both academia and real life. However, and it constitutes a reasonable counterargument, these issues, first, deserve a separate domain of investigation, and, second, formulate a different branch of research agenda: how should the global world prevent such reversals to the past of fear dictatorships?

Overall, this book is an essential introduction to contemporary non-democratic regimes. It is crucial for those who have little or no knowledge of how such contemporary regimes function. Nevertheless, for those who have been exposed to a particular case (say, Putin's Russia), *Spin Dictators* will also be of high value: the book shows that Putin (in the before-2021 version when Anti-Corruption Foundation established by Alexei Navalny was designated as an extremist organisation), it is not an exceptional case but just one among many of the spin dictators.

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