

**Anne Applebaum. *Autocracy, Inc.:
The Dictators Who Want to Run the
World*. London: Allen Lane, 2024. 978-
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Dominik Rubes

What binds the regimes in Russia, China, and Iran, as well as other places like Venezuela or North Korea, together? Not enough for us to consider them a unified global alliance or axis, but enough to speak of a new worrisome phenomenon, Anne Applebaum argues in her latest book. Putin's kleptocratic circle, the Chinese Communist Party, the theocrats in Tehran, self-proclaimed socialist Maduro, and the deified dictator on the Korean Peninsula can hardly be said to constitute a coherent ideological block akin to the Soviet empire that was the main antagonist to the West in the Cold War. Still, these and other authoritarian regimes have gradually formed an interconnected network to protect their leaders' hold on power and project influence on the global stage. Sharing "a ruthless, single-minded determination to preserve their personal wealth and power" (p. 2) and, consequently, a common enemy—democratic and liberal ideas and those who defend them—modern autocrats in Applebaum's account operate "like an agglomeration of companies" (p. 2): striking deals, coordinating actions and narratives, and sharing resources to attack liberal democratic norms globally and to withstand both external and internal challenges to their rule—a phenomenon that she terms *Autocracy, Inc.*

The primary contribution of this short, just over 200-page, book lies in providing a solid account of the workings of *Autocracy, Inc.* Throughout the book, but particularly in Chapters 1 and 2, Applebaum recounts how autocratic regimes survive Western sanctions by turning to the vast network of their peers for support, with Russia, China and Iran often being the most important, though far from the only, sources of assistance. The help can come in many forms, such as trade and investment deals, the provision of surveillance technology, military personnel, propaganda services, political support, and advice on how to handle opposition. This is how rulers such as Lukashenko in Belarus or Maduro in Venezuela remain in power. As Emmerson Mnangagwa, Mugabe's successor in the presidential office in Zimbabwe and a comrade of Vladimir Putin, put it: "The victims of sanctions must cooperate" (p. 64). Extreme cases of this phenomenon can be found in certain African countries such as Mali or the Central African Republic.

There, Russia's Wagner Group effectively offered a "regime survival package" (p. 120), including mercenary forces and propaganda campaigns, to local rulers in exchange for economic deals, as described by the Royal United Services Institute.¹

Chapter 3 unpacks Autocracy, Inc.'s propaganda machine and its global reach. Whether in Africa, Latin America, or Asia, vast networks of media controlled from Moscow, Beijing, or Tehran spread anti-Western narratives and topics professionally tailored to different audiences across the globe. Russian state media, for example, regularly portray the West as decadent and in a state of chaotic decay and Russia as a protector of traditional family and Christian values, forced to defend civilisation by fighting neo-Nazis in Ukraine. As detailed in Chapter 4, hiding under the notions of protecting "sovereignty", promoting global "multipolarity", or pushing against "Western imperialism", Russia and China also work relentlessly to build coalitions to erase the language of human rights and democracy from international treaties and documents. Chapter 5, in turn, describes the templates of smear campaigns, legal investigations, and targeted violence that autocratic regimes today rely on to intimidate and discredit domestic opposition. For example, democratic opposition advocates are routinely described as foreign agents, which may lead to their formal investigations and arrests.

Applebaum is careful not to overstate her thesis. It is not only the ideological (as well as geographical and cultural) heterogeneity of the members of Autocracy Inc. that leads her to reject simplified narratives of a New Cold War or a struggle between autocratic and democratic countries. She also argues that some autocratic regimes do not fit her concept since they are much more cooperative with the Western world, such as "the U.A.E., Saudi Arabia, Singapore [or] Vietnam" (p. 158), just as there are illiberal regimes in "Turkey, Singapore, India, the Philippines, Hungary—which sometimes align with the democratic world and sometimes don't" (p. 2). Her concept applies primarily to "the strongmen who lead Russia, China, Iran, North Korea, Venezuela, Nicaragua, Angola, Myanmar, Cuba, Syria, Zimbabwe, Mali, Belarus, Sudan, Azerbaijan, and perhaps three dozen others" (p. 2). As such, the concept's scope conditions are somewhat open-ended. The book's intention is not to categorise exactly who belongs to this geopolitical corporate network. It is to put a spotlight on the systems and practices on which modern autocrats rely and through which they grow increasingly emboldened.

Another layer of complexity that Applebaum highlights is that "the divisions run inside countries, too" (p. 158). On the one hand, she writes about the domestic opposition in many authoritarian countries—its continued fight in the face of often brutal suppression. In the Epilogue, she recalls the meeting of the World Liberty Congress in 2022, which united democratic opposition from all around the world. "To them, Autocracy, Inc., isn't a book title: it's a reality that they grapple with every day. By sharing experiences, they learn to understand the patterns, to anticipate the tactics that will be used against them, and to prepare to resist them" (p. 153). It is clear from Applebaum's writing that she draws much inspiration from these people. The book's dedication, "For the optimists", may be seen as a reference not least to those who still resist Autocracy, Inc. from within, despite the developments that the book describes.

On the other hand, Applebaum does not let the reader forget that there are illiberal and quasi-authoritarian tendencies and corruption in the West itself, echoing her previous book, *The Twilight of Democracy*, which tackles this topic at length.² She begins *Autocracy, Inc.* with a chapter criticising the greed of many Western financial institutions and the loopholes in the global financial system that allow oligarchs, criminals, and autocrats of the world to launder their dirty money. In the Epilogue, Applebaum calls for less political naivety and more coordination among democratic forces in dealing with the autocrats. This should include continuing to cut dangerous economic dependencies on adversarial regimes, supporting trustworthy media organisations that push back against authoritarian propaganda, and coordinating a reform of the global financial system. Ultimately, Applebaum writes that we are witnessing not a fight between democratic and autocratic state-based blocks but a struggle between democratic and “autocratic behaviors, wherever they are found: in Russia, in China, in Europe, in the United States” (p. 159).

Many of the points above will sound familiar to close followers of international politics. Indeed, the book largely grew out of Applebaum's articles in *The Atlantic* and elsewhere. Thus, those who frequent her writing should be cautioned not to expect a novel contribution but rather a succinct summary of her main points. Similarly, the book is deliberately brief, and those interested in an in-depth analysis of some of the phenomena Applebaum describes will have to consult other sources (some of which she references in the book), such as Oliver Bullough's *Moneyland* or Tom Burgis' *Kleptopia* on the topic of kleptocratic global financial networks.³

Another point of caution is for those expecting an intricate theorisation of *Autocracy, Inc.*. Applebaum sets out to highlight a phenomenon with the help of a catchy label, which is reflected in her writing style, in line with her background in history and journalism rather than political science. Her book does not provide a holistic theoretical framework for interpreting today's geopolitics, predicting the future, or offering a deep analysis of all the factors that sustain modern autocratic regimes, which academic scholars may expect. Nonetheless, understanding the nature of *Autocracy, Inc.*, Applebaum would posit, allows us to better interpret and analyse the behaviour of its members because it is often coordinated.

“The autocracies keep track of one another's defeats and victories, timing their own moves to create maximum chaos” (p. 155), she writes. In Ukraine, for example, the democratic West is not fighting just Russia but *Autocracy, Inc.*—facing an attack “not only to acquire territory but also to show the world that the old rules of international behaviour no longer hold” (p. 13). The attack was launched from Moscow but was supported more or less directly from capitals all over the autocratic network. This was written before North Korean troops, not just weapons, physically entered Ukraine to fight alongside Russia, underscoring this point.⁴

Applebaum's book ultimately serves as both a warning and a case against cynicism. Despite the book's attention to nuance, Applebaum is characteristically unambiguous when it comes to describing the corrupt, autocratic forces in the world and the open hostility they adopt towards their shared enemy: “That enemy is us”, she writes. “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" (p. 10). The book is a timely call for us in the democratic West to clearly define the threats we face, just as the autocrats do. Moreover, like the internal democratic opponents of tyrannical regimes, we must realise that although "[t]here is no liberal world order anymore" (p. 175), there are still values, norms, and institutions that are worth our unapologetic defence.

Notes

1. J. Watling, O. V Danylyuk, and N. Reynolds, "The Threat from Russia's Unconventional Warfare Beyond Ukraine, 2022-24," 2024. [Online]. Available: www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/special-resources/threat-russias-unconventional-warfare-beyond-ukraine-2022-24
2. J A. Applebaum, *Twilight of Democracy: The Seductive Lure of Authoritarianism*. New York City: Doubleday, 2020.
3. T. Burgis, *Kleptopia: How Dirty Money Is Conquering the World*. New York City: Harper, 2020. O. Bullough, *Moneyland: Why Thieves And Crooks Now Rule The World And How To Take It Back*. London: Profile Books, 2018.
4. J. Kim and J. Lee, "North Korea troops have joined Ukraine war battles as part of Russian units, Seoul says," Reuters, Nov. 20, 2024. [Online]. Available: <https://www.reuters.com/world/north-korea-troops-participated-some-ukraine-war-battles-part-russian-units-2024-11-20/>