An Overview of Autocracy in Putin's Russia and Its Relevance for Journalists in South Asia

23 April 2025. Dr Peter Braga at the UCL School of Slavonic and East European Studies.

This introductory paper examines the evolution of Russia's political system under Vladimir Putin, tracing its transformation from an electoral autocracy[1] to a personalist dictatorship supported by ideology. I describe the four key phases in the transformation of Putin's regime. Central to this process has been the instrumentalisation of the media, which serves both to legitimise the regime and monitor dissent. While Russia's trajectory is specific, its methods (including legal manipulation, performance legitimacy, ideological conservatism, media control, the erosion of opposition, etc.) may offer points for comparison for journalists working in similarly constrained environments across South Asia.

To begin, consider the following illustrative example. On 26 March 2025, two things happened in Russia that are both desperately mundane or highly interesting, depending on how much you follow Russian politics. The first thing is Russian Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin delivered his Annual Report on the Government to the *Duma*—Russia's parliament. The second thing is that day—26 March 2025—is exactly 25 years since Vladimir Putin was first elected President of the Russian Federation. That election is likely the most democratic in Russia under Vladimir Putin (Sokolova et al., 2024). As part of the Annual Report to Parliament, party opposition leaders are supposed to criticise and comment on the government's performance

1. This paper uses the terms autocracy and authoritarian interchangeably. But it should be noted that authoritarianism was originally coined to describe the appearance of non-totalitarian nondemocracies (Gerschewski, 2023, pp. 30–31). Today, authoritarian has become a catch-all term for nondemocracy. It lacks descriptive precision. Autocracy, on the other hand, identifies the nature of the political regime more precisely. In an autocracy (auto-cracy literally means self-rule), power belongs to a single person or a group of persons.

and plans. Within this pseudo-democratic structure, the largest opposition party is the Communist Party of the Russian Federation (Federal Assembly, 2025). Communist Party Leader Gennady Zyuganov began by making it clear he wasn't really there to represent the opposition. Instead, he praised Vladimir Putin (Government of Russia, 2025):

> It was on this day exactly 25 years ago that Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin was elected President. Over the years, he changed his strategy four times, assembled a disintegrating country, fought against terrorists, did everything to form national programs and projects, and set the main task in his message—to strengthen sovereignty on the basis of self-sufficiency. […] The war [against Ukraine] has cleared our heads, cleaned out our ears, and opened our eyes.

This situation is illustrative of Russia's political system today. The parliament is a façade for democracy. The parliamentary opposition parties are all systemic parties—they are there to support Putin's power (Laverty, 2015). However, Zyuganov did say one thing that I partly agree with. Zyuganov noted, "Over the years, [Putin] changed his strategy four times" (Government of Russia, 2025, para. 559). And, indeed, after Putin consolidated his hold on power in 2003, Putin did adjust his strategy to ruling Russia in four stages. I will touch on these four stages as I characterise the regime type and map the evolution of autocracy in Putin's Russia.

Today, Russia is no longer just an electoral autocracy—it is a personalist dictatorship with an ideological face. An electoral autocracy is a political system that holds elections, but key attributes of democracy are degraded or missing (Schedler, 2006, 2013). When Putin first assumed power, Russia's political system had both formal limits and informal opposition to his power, such as constitutional term limits and political opposition (McFaul, 2021). But over time, Putin has removed these checks (Golosov, 2023). Putin's Russia is personalist, because Putin now has personal control of the key levers of power (Geddes et al., 2018, pp. 70–71; Golosov, 2023, p. 392). It is also a dictatorship because Putin has removed both the formal

and informal institutional constraints on his power (more on this where I describe the evolution of the regime below). To legitimise this autocratic transformation, Putin has developed a post-liberal ideology. For the first half of Putin's political career, the regime lacked a legitimising ideology (Laruelle, 2025, pp. 265–272). Instead, it relied on the performance legitimacy of improving living standards (Frye et al., 2017, p. 2). After 2012, however, Putin encouraged the development of an increasingly conservative, civilisational ideology to legitimise his regime (Snegovaya & McGlynn, 2025). More on this new ideology in a moment.

So far, I have characterised how contemporary Russia can be classified on paper: it is an electoral authoritarian, personalist dictatorship. But this does not explain how day-to-day politics actually works. Russia functions as a modern, bureaucratic state. This exists alongside a system of patronage and informal deals. This is what Henry Hale (2015) characterises as neopatrimonialism. Russia's particular version of this is called *Sistema* (Ledeneva, 2013) or the "dual state" (Sakwa, 2011). Politics functioning according to a mixture of formal rules and informal practices is common to all societies. And to understand this better, Alena Ledeneva at UCL School of Slavonic and East European Studies (where I work) has established the Global Informality Project, an online encyclopaedia of corruption and informal practices (UCL SSEES, 2024). I encourage you check it out. There are likely to be entries covering different forms of corruption and informal politics that are transferable to your own situations and societies.

It is inappropriate to speak of democratic "backsliding" in the case of Russia's political regime. In certain cases, such as recent events in Bangladesh or India, we might speak of backsliding (Bhandari & Reed, 2025; Chowdhury, 2025). But in regimes like Putin's Russia, despite the presence of electoral institutions, there is no backsliding. Russia is an autocracy that incorporates elections as a feature—there is no movement from this condition; this would require a major restructuring of the political system. Today, Russia does not backslide from or progress towards

democracy. Elements of a multi-party democracy are essential to the current autocratic system in Russia. This is a specific autocratic subtype (Schedler, 2013, pp. 79–82). To describe an event as democratic backsliding in Russia's case does more to obscure than explain. It attributes a deviation to what is, in fact, a cyclical feature of the system (Cianetti & Hanley, 2021; Hale, 2015).

Russia's political regime under Putin evolved from a party-based, personalist autocracy to a personalist dictatorship in four stages. The transformations were improvised and pragmatic. From 2003 to 2008, Putin used the United Russia Party to dominate Russian politics (Reuter & Remington, 2009). In this early period, Putin acted as a balancer among his inner-circle elites (Pavlovsky, 2016). The regime gained popularity through performance legitimacy and media messaging—what Guriev and Treisman (2022) call a "spin-dictatorship". As Prime Minister from 2008 to 2012, Putin increased his control over United Russia and engineered his return as Russian president (Laverty, 2015; McFaul, 2021). Following the anti-corruption Bolotnaya Protests and Putin's return to the presidency, 2012 to 2020 became a transitional period. Declining oil prices, increasing confrontation with the West, and growing fatigue with Putin's prolonged rule meant the regime could no longer rely on performance legitimacy (Wilson, 2023, pp. 68 and 83–84). To replace performance, the regime developed an ideological conservatism in an ad-hoc, pragmatic manner (Laruelle, 2021, 2025; Lewis, 2020; Suslov, 2018). Among inner circle elites, Putin shifted from a balancer to a decider (Pavlovsky, 2016). The regime formalised the transition to a personalist dictatorship with the 2020 constitutional reforms allowing Putin to remain President until 2036 (Teague, 2020, p. 307). Putin materialised his dictatorial power by almost single-handedly deciding to invade Ukraine on 24 February 2022 (Kirby, 2022; Zygar, 2023, Chapter 14). Today, Putin's Russia is a personalist dictatorship, legitimised by ideology.

What role does the media play in today's Russia? The media—defined broadly to include traditional sources and social media—has two primary functions as a tool

of the state. Its first function is to manufacture and maintain the illusion of democracy while ensuring elite dominance (Wilson, 2023). The Russian state has systematically undermined genuine democratic processes, using media to shape narratives, stage political drama (*dramaturgiya*), and manage public opinion through a combination of spectacle, distraction and propaganda (ibid.). The media is weaponised to construct enemies—both foreign and domestic—divert attention from internal failures, and foster a conformist, loyal "Putin majority" (ibid.). The second function of the media (especially social media since the 2022 expansion of Russia's war against Ukraine) is to monitor opposition to the regime and to act as a release valve for discontent (Borogan & Soldatov, 2022; Logunova, 2024). This means the media is not entirely state-controlled, but it is monitored.[2] The *Telegram* messaging app, in particular, is preferred as a non-Western controlled means for both the state and civilians to communicate (Logunova, 2024). In short, media in Putin's Russia is not a conduit for public will or a watchdog of power, but a mechanism by which power legitimises itself and monitors dissent.

The trajectory of autocracy in Putin's Russia offers points of resonance for journalists from India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka. These points of resonance include the incremental erosion of democratic institutions, the instrumentalisation of nationalism, and the co-optation or suppression of the media (Bhandari & Reed, 2025; Curtis, 2025, pp. 10–12; Jaffrelot, 2024, Conclusion, Paragraphs 11–26; Masood, 2024; Sriskanda Rajah, 2017, p. 155). Russia did not become a personalist dictatorship overnight; as the above shows, it moved gradually from electoral authoritarianism to a regime that increasingly fuses state narratives with national identity—such as Putin's Russian World concept and his July 2021 essay on Ukraine—while marginalising dissent and narrowing the space for independent journalism (Putin, 2021; Suslov, 2018). This gradual degradation of

2. Russia uses its SORN system and so-called "deep packet inspection" to monitor internet communication (Soldatov & Borogan, 2017). There is no censorship system equivalent to the "Chinese firewall" in Russia (Wilson, 2023, pp. 76 and 368).

democratic norms through legal, institutional, and ideological means might appear familiar to journalists operating in South Asia. Similar pressures on the judiciary, opposition, and media—whether overt or veiled—are present to varying degrees.

The Russian experience emphasises the role of informal systems of power, patronage, and performative state rituals in legitimising authoritarian rule. Russia's *Sistema* or dual state—where formal state systems and informal elite networks interact and are necessary for the state to function—might provide South Asian journalists with a comparative lens to examine their own political environments. Whether it is state media promoting dominant party narratives, marginalised opposition figures being labelled as traitors, or national identity being deployed against perceived foreign influence, the Russian case offers insight into how authoritarian regimes secure compliance and manufacture consensus. For journalists from the subcontinent, these reflections both caution against the creeping normalisation of illiberalism and underline the crucial role of independent media in holding power to account, even in the most restrictive of climates.

To conclude, the Putin regime's transformation from electoral authoritarianism to a personalist dictatorship underpinned by a conservative ideology may offer some insights for journalists from South Asia. In general, the Russian case illustrates how informal power structures and formal state practices can sustain authoritarian rule even in states with sophisticated bureaucracies. For journalists operating in environments where democratic norms are being gradually undermined, Russia is a cautionary example of how illiberalism can become entrenched, even when the media is not entirely controlled. In this context, understanding Russia's political transformation is not just an academic exercise. It is a reminder of what is at stake when democratic institutions erode and why independent journalism remains essential in guarding against authoritarian consolidation.

References

Bhandari, A., & Reed, J. (2025, April 4). Will Modi risk redrawing India's electoral map? *Financial Times*. https://www.ft.com/content/706d222c-6b50-4eb2-b8ec-5d932133063d

Borogan, I., & Soldatov, A. (2022, May 25). Russia's Military Telegrams its Discontent [Think Tank]. *CEPA*. https://cepa.org/article/russias-military-telegrams-its-discontent/

Chowdhury, N. S. (2025). The Return of Politics in Bangladesh. *Journal of Democracy*, *36*(1), 65–78.

Cianetti, L., & Hanley, S. (2021). The End of the Backsliding Paradigm. *Journal of Democracy*, *32*(1), 66–80. https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2021.0001

Curtis, J. (2025). *Bangladesh: The fall of the Hasina Government and recent political developments* (Research Briefing No. 10096; House of Commons Research Briefing, p. 32). UK Parliament. https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-10096/

Federal Assembly. (2025). *Factions* [Government website]. The State Duma. http://duma.gov.ru/en/

Frye, T., Gehlbach, S., Marquardt, K. L., & Reuter, O. J. (2017). Is Putin's popularity real? *Post-Soviet Affairs*, *33*(1), 1–15. https://doi.org/10.1080/1060586X.2016.1144334

Geddes, B., Wright, J., & Frantz, E. (2018). *How dictatorships work: Power, personalization, and collapse*. Cambridge University Press.

Gerschewski, J. (2023). *The Two Logics of Autocratic Rule*. Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009199407

Golosov, G. V. (2023). The place of Russia's political regime (2003–2023) on a conceptual map of the world's autocracies. *Social Science Information*, *62*(3), 390–408. https://doi.org/10.1177/05390184231207597

Government of Russia. (2025, April 19). *Ezhegodnyi otchet Pravitel'stva v Gosudarstvennoi Dume* [Government website]. Pravitel'stvo Rossii [The Russian Government]. http://government.ru/news/54597/

Guriev, S. M., & Treisman, D. (2022). *Spin dictators: The changing face of tyranny in the 21st century*. Princeton University Press.

Hale, H. E. (2015). *Patronal politics: Eurasian regime dynamics in comparative perspective*. Cambridge University Press.

Jaffrelot, C. (2024). *Gujarat Under Modi: Laboratory of Today's India*. C. Hurst & Co Publishers Ltd.

Kirby, P. (2022, March 3). Ukraine conflict: Who's in Putin's inner circle and running the war? *BBC News*. https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-60573261

Laruelle, M. (2021). *Is Russia fascist? Unraveling propaganda east and west*. Cornell University Press.

Laruelle, M. (2025). *Ideology and Meaning-Making under the Putin Regime*. Stanford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1515/9781503641600

Laverty, N. (2015). The "party of power" as a type. *East European Politics*, *31*(1), 71–87. https://doi.org/10.1080/21599165.2014.983088

Ledeneva, A. V. (2013). *Can Russia modernise? Sistema, Power Networks and Informal Governance*. Cambridge University Press.

Lewis, D. G. (2020). *Russia's new authoritarianism: Putin and the politics of order*. Edinburgh University Press. https://edinburghuniversitypress.com/book-russia-s-new-authoritarianism.html

Logunova, O. (2024, October 9). Telegram: Why the app is allowed when other social media is censored in Russia. *The Conversation*. http://theconversation.com/telegram-why-the-app-is-allowed-when-other-social-media-is-censored-in-russia-238261

Masood, S. (2024, October 21). Judicial Overhaul Squeaks Through After High Political Drama in Pakistan. *The New York Times*. https://www.nytimes.com/2024/10/21/world/asia/pakistan-judiciary-amendments.html

McFaul, M. (2021). Russia's Road to Autocracy. *Journal of Democracy*, *32*(4), 11–26.

Pavlovsky, G. (2016). Russian Politics Under Putin: The System Will Outlast the Master. *Foreign Affairs*, *95*(3), 10–17.

Putin, V. V. (2021, July 12). *Article by Vladimir Putin "On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians"* [Government website]. President of Russia. http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66181

Reuter, O. J., & Remington, T. F. (2009). Dominant Party Regimes and the Commitment Problem: The Case of United Russia. *Comparative Political Studies*, *42*(4), 501–526. https://doi.org/10.1177/0010414008327426

Sakwa, R. (2011). *The crisis of Russian democracy: The dual state, factionalism, and the Medvedev succession*. Cambridge University Press.

Schedler, A. (Ed.). (2006). *Electoral authoritarianism: The dynamics of unfree competition*. L. Rienner Publishers, Inc.

Schedler, A. (2013). *The politics of uncertainty: Sustaining and subverting electoral authoritarianism* (1st ed). Oxford University Press. 10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199680320.001.0001

Snegovaya, M., & McGlynn, J. (2025). Dissecting Putin's regime ideology. *Post-Soviet Affairs*. https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/1060586X.2024.2386838

Sokolova, A., Lakova, K., & Bogachev, A. (2024, March). *How to uncover electoral fraud in Russia using statistics: A complete guide* [Think Tank]. Cedar: Center for Data and Research on Russia. https://cedarus.io/research/undefined/research/evolution-of-russian-elections

Soldatov, A., & Borogan, I. (2017). *The red web: The Kremlin's wars on the internet* (First Edition, First Trade Paperback Edition). PublicAffairs.

Sriskanda Rajah, A. R. (2017). *Government and Politics in Sri Lanka: Biopolitics and Security*. Routledge, Taylor & Francis. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315265711

Suslov, M. (2018). "Russian World" Concept: Post-Soviet Geopolitical Ideology and the Logic of "Spheres of Influence". *Geopolitics*, *23*(2), 330–353. https://doi.org/10.1080/14650045.2017.1407921

Teague, E. (2020). Russia's Constitutional Reforms of 2020. *Russian Politics*, *5*(3), 301–328. https://doi.org/10.30965/24518921-00503003

UCL SSEES. (2024). *Global Informality Project* [Online Encyclopaedia]. Global Informality Project. https://www.in-formality.com/wiki/index.php?title=Global_Informality_Project

Wilson, A. (2023). *Political Technology: The Globalisation of Political Manipulation*. Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009355308.003

Zygar, M. (2023). *War and punishment: Putin, Zelensky, and the path to Russia's invasion of Ukraine* (First Scribner hardcover edition). Scribner.

https://public.ebookcentral.proquest.com/choice/PublicFullRecord.aspx?p=7269789