

Introductory Speech

23 April 2025. Dr Peter Braga. Lecturer in Post-Soviet Politics at the UCL School of Slavonic and East European Studies.

Thank you. I'm going to briefly outline how autocracy in Russia has evolved under Vladimir Putin and suggest a few ways this might resonate with the experiences of journalists working in other politically constrained environments, particularly in South Asia.

Let me start with a telling example. On 26 March 2025, the Russian Prime Minister opened his annual address to parliament—just another routine political event. But that same day marked exactly 25 years since Vladimir Putin was first elected president. The country's largest so-called opposition party, the Communists, didn't use the occasion to challenge the government. Instead, they praised Putin and described the war in Ukraine as an awakening. This is illustrative of Russia's political system today: elections still happen, opposition parties still sit in parliament, but these processes serve to empower autocracy, not to constrain it. We see the façade of democracy without its substance.

Russia has a political system that holds elections but never risks losing them. If democracy is organised uncertainty, then autocracy is the politics of organised certainty. Under Vladimir Putin, Russia's political system has hardened into a personalist dictatorship, where power is centralised in the hands of one individual. Ideology plays an increasing role in justifying the regime's actions.

What makes Russia's system distinctive is the way it blends formal and informal politics. Formally, Russia still has laws, courts, and political parties. Informally, elite loyalty, patronage, and unwritten rules govern how power is exercised. The general term for this is neopatrimonialism—a type of clientelism. Russia's particular type of neopatrimonialism is called Sistema—a system that relies on informal practices (such as corruption) and also official institutions (such as

parliaments, laws, and courts) to govern. These dual logics—of legality and loyalty—are central to how the regime sustains itself.

Let me say a word about the role of the media. In Russia, the media currently performs two key functions for the regime. First, it helps to maintain the façade of democratic governance. It deflects criticism, creates spectacle, and frames political events in terms that reinforce Putin’s leadership. Second, especially since the Ukraine war, the media has become a surveillance and pressure valve. Before Russia’s expanded war against Ukraine, the Russian media sphere allowed a degree of dissent. After Putin decided to seize all of Ukraine, media control has greatly intensified—but it is not total. The popular Telegram messaging app, for example, is still accessible. It is used by both the state and citizens. It’s where propaganda circulates, dissent is monitored, and grievances are aired. It serves both as megaphone and sensor.

It’s important to underline that Russia’s authoritarianism did not develop overnight. The shift was gradual and pragmatic. Early on, Putin’s regime justified itself by improving living standards. But when that faltered after 2012, it increasingly turned to history and patriotism. This eventually became an ideology, a type of Russian, post-liberal, civilisational conservatism.

Some might use the term “democratic backsliding” to describe what’s happened in Russia. I would caution against this. In Russia’s case, we are not talking about a democracy in decline. Electoral authoritarianism is a type of autocracy that requires democratic institutions. Elections, opposition parties, and for much of the time even critical media—all have existed. But only the vast majority is monitored and curated by the state. The state dominates these institutions to maintain its own power.

So, what might this mean for journalists from South Asia? I would suggest looking at four dynamics in the Russian case that may sound familiar:

- 1) Democratic evaporation: The gradual and piecemeal erosion of democratic institutions within formal legality—altering laws, weakening courts, and sidelining opposition under the guise of regulation.
- 2) Law-fare: the use of court and legality to remove or sideline opponents.
- 3) Costly public participation: Not total censorship, but a state curation of the media. Making the costs of public criticism against the ruler extremely high. If someone speaks out against the autocracy, for example, they are hounded by regime loyalists and ruthlessly harassed.
- 4) Persistence of informal networks: The survival of informal, patronage networks within formal structures. This can undermine even major reforms, if informal networks are allowed to persist within formal institutions. The more things change, the more they stay the same.

To conclude, Russia under late Putinism is a politically closed, ideologically conservative, highly centralised regime. But what's most instructive is not its end point. Instead, the thing to focus on is the process: the gradual adaptation of illiberal methods under the cover of legality and patriotism. For journalists, understanding this trajectory is not just about Russia—it is a reminder of what can happen when democratic norms are treated as expendable and media becomes a tool of the state rather than a check on power.

Thank you, and I look forward to our discussion.