

Nobody loves Russia: how western media have perpetuated the myth of Putin's 'neo-Soviet autocracy'

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Russia's political system has frequently been criticised by Western politicians and commentators, with some observers drawing parallels between the rule of Vladimir Putin and the old Soviet regime during the communist-era. But how accurate are these criticisms? [Andrei P. Tsygankov](#) writes that a particular narrative which views Russia as a 'neo-Soviet autocracy' has built up in western media sources. He argues that this narrative ignores the reality of Putin's regime and serves simply to legitimise the identity of the United States and the American-led 'free world' relative to that of an 'oppressive' Russia.



Advocates of Western-style democracy frequently assert that Russia has built a neo-Soviet 'autocratic' political system with elements of totalitarianism. Struggling to understand the country's transition from the USSR, Western media commonly describe Russia in terms of its fitting with the old pattern. Contemporary Russian politics is assessed not on the scale of how far it has gotten away from the Soviet Union, but, rather, how much Russia became a Soviet-like 'one-party state' driven by a 'KGB mentality' and dependent on the use of propaganda, 'Cold War rhetoric', and repressions against internal opposition in order to consolidate state power.

Surveying editorials in leading American newspapers, it is easy to be struck by the power of the neo-Soviet autocracy narrative. Violations, irregularities, and improvisations in Russia's political life are now typically attributed by the U.S. media to the Kremlin's fear of opposition and the overly centralised, non-accountable system of governance.

Such consistency is accomplished by the presence of a coherent narrative of Russia. In particular, the U.S. media sustains and promotes the binary narrative that juxtaposes and contrasts the vision of a morally inferior neo-Soviet Russia with that of a superior American system. For example, while explaining the Kremlin's growing mistrust in the United States, the *Washington Post* [advanced](#) the following interpretation:

With former KGB officer Vladimir Putin in charge, Russia has become increasingly closed in many ways. Historical archives that after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 welcomed scholars from all nations have re-shut their doors. Television has fallen back under government control. International organizations have been pushed out of Russia, and independent nonprofit groups in Russia have been squeezed, harassed and threatened. Russia is essentially a one-party state, as it was 20 years ago.

The United States by contrast is wide open. Unlike American organizations in Russia, the Russian government is welcome to hire public relations firms here, put Russian programming on cable television and distribute its message as it sees fit. Its diplomats are welcome to attend think-tank seminars in Washington, and the give-and-take of American politics is an open book for them.

Key references here include characterisations of Russia as "closed", associated with the KGB, the Soviet Union, and "government control" as well as presentation of the United States as "by contrast" "wide open" including to influences by the Russian government.

Overall, while promising not 'to ignore the dark side' of Russia's political system with its corruption, selective use of

law, and low tolerance for opposition, the American press has ignored all other sides of Russia by making the 'dark side' central to its coverage. By exploiting misleading historical analogies, it has offered one-sided interpretations of complex processes, and ignored areas of political development that do not fit the narrative. In particular, the U.S. media has failed to notice political areas not controlled by the government, sources of support for Putin not related to the Kremlin's 'relentless propaganda', and actions by the Russian state that do not fit the description of 'dictatorial power'.

Parallels to Soviet (totalitarian) practices are misleading not only because they make no distinction between Stalin and post-Stalin developments, but also because they present the Soviet experience as the only significant one for understanding Russia's historical trajectory. If, however, the contemporary Russian system does not fit expectations of a Western-style democracy, this does not yet make this system a Soviet or neo-Soviet one.

Instead, Russia reaches back to its centuries-long political experience before communism. After the stifling decades of communism, historical thinking is being revived inside the country. Rather than making references to the Soviet past, Russian analysts more commonly resort to analogies of the Times of Trouble (*smuta*), Dual Power (*dvoyevlastiye*), In-Between-Tsardom (*mezhdutsarstviye*), or other historically meaningful terms. Although the U.S. media makes

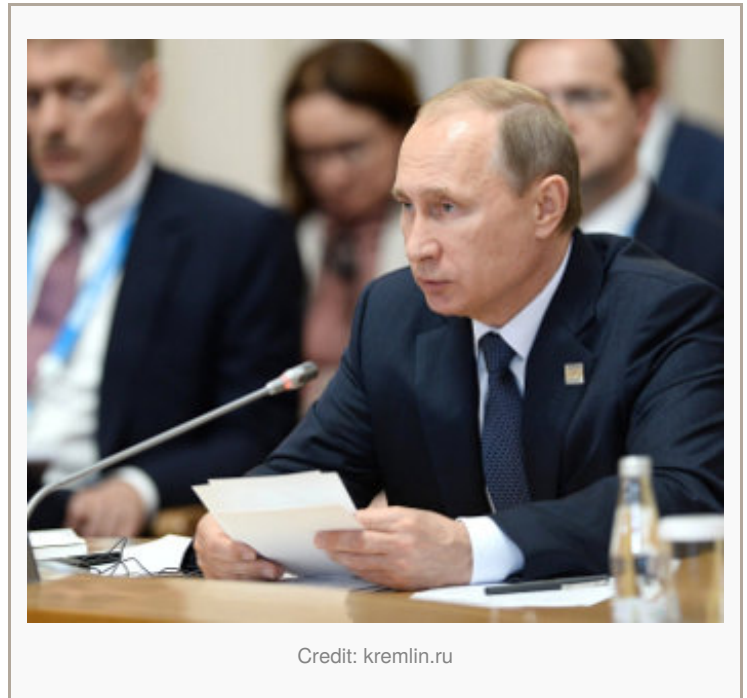
occasional references to 'czarist' practices, it is much more comfortable with the Soviet parallels – arguably, because it knows too little of Russia's pre-Soviet history and its differences from the Soviet period.

The [strong state system](#) Russia is aiming to revive is not what the editors of the *New York Times* or *Washington Post* have in mind when they discuss Russia's 'autocracy'. The strong state is not to be confused with totalitarianism or unlimited control over private and public life. Even tsarist autocracy (*samoderzhaviye*) was largely respectful of established social and political boundaries, as the Church, nationality, and the self-governing institutions served as informal constraints on the Tsar's power.

The post-Soviet state also does not seek to eliminate competition in economic and political life, as the Soviet regime did. Instead, the Kremlin wants to shape and influence such competition. State shares in economic corporations, the designation of Dmitry Medvedev as Putin's successor, attempts to influence institutions of civil society by creating the Public Chamber from above, providing grants to Russian NGOs through a competitive process, and initiating changes in the legislature to limit foreign influences in Russian politics are all examples of such state efforts to influence competition.

As Graeme Robertson [writes](#), under such a hybrid regime, "competition is less something that authoritarians have failed to eliminate, but rather something that they consciously allow and try to control". Despite additional limitations placed by the state on political competition in the country following the Ukraine crisis, areas of freedom in Russia are significant, especially when compared to the Soviet period. Alternative news coverage remains available, as the internet, newspapers, and some radio and television channels are largely free of state control.

The U.S. media is also incorrect to assume that high levels of public support for Putin predominantly results from the Kremlin's 'relentless propaganda' and that 'when given a real democratic choice, millions of Russians will reject Putinism'. Perceiving a strong state rule as illegitimate and backed up primarily by propaganda and force has been a



common Western error in judging bases of political stability in Russia. In practice, many Russians historically supported a strong state and did not view it as internally oppressive.

They justified such a system by the needs of internal development and security from outside threats. Russia's vast size, geopolitical vulnerability, and economic underdevelopment dictated that the ruled ones would have considerable support for a highly centralised system. Of course, Russian rulers differed. Some of them neglected the need for internal development and engaged in risky international adventures, while others used their time wisely by formulating long-term objectives and mobilising the required resources. Public support for rulers varied too, but it has been largely supportive of a 'good' or 'bad' strong state, rather than a Western-style democracy.

Finally, it is misleading to view Putin as a ruler with dictatorial power responsible for all the achievements and flaws of Russia's political system. Comparisons between Putin and Stalin are common in the U.S. media, yet there is little appreciation of Putin's administrative weakness and inability to deliver on his own promises. The Russian state is frequently ineffective in dealing with serious problems: from mobilising economic resources to solving crimes. The U.S. media occasionally alludes to this, but it is more typical to assign Putin responsibility for the murders of journalists or opposition politicians, terrorist acts, and other grave developments in Russian politics.

In cultural and political terms, the neo-Soviet autocracy narrative serves to legitimise the identity of the United States and the American-led 'free world' relative to that of the 'oppressive' Russia. To American elites, Russia makes an important public enemy because, arguably, no other country has challenged U.S. values and interests as vigorously and persistently as Russia. The U.S. media reflects fear of the strong state system by presenting it as a mirror image of the American system and grossly simplifying Russia's complex transformation. The narrative assists the media in engaging with the U.S. public in part because old Cold War views have not entirely disappeared from the public mind and have not been replaced by a different understanding of new realities. As the media has not presented an alternative Russian narrative, American society remains receptive to the dominant perspective.

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About the author

Andrei P. Tsygankov – *San Francisco State University*

[Andrei P. Tsygankov](#) is Professor in the Departments of Political Science and International Relations at San Francisco State University. He is the author of *The Strong State in Russia* (OUP, 2015).

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