

Review – Autocracy, Inc.

Written by Stephen G. F. Hall

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STEPHEN G. F. HALL, DEC 2 2024

Autocracy, Inc.: The Dictators Who Want to Run the World

By Anne Applebaum

Penguin Random House, 2024

Increasingly, autocracies are forming a collaborative system in which they actively support each other in consolidating power, undermining democratic institutions, and reshaping global norms. Anne Applebaum in her book *Autocracy, Inc.* provides incisive analysis spanning continents, ideologies, and regimes, painting a vivid picture of a world where authoritarianism is not merely a domestic phenomenon but a coordinated transnational network that is far more collaborative than common perceptions of isolated autocrat strongmen in individual states. Hence, the book provides a powerful exploration of the growing transnational network of modern autocratic regimes that is collaborative, adaptable, and looking to undermine and devalue democracy.

At its core, *Autocracy, Inc.* argues that modern autocracies are far more interconnected than they appear. Applebaum traces the rise of an informal alliance among authoritarian states like Russia, China, Iran, Venezuela, Belarus, and others, examining how these regimes exchange resources, technology, propaganda strategies, and diplomatic support to strengthen their grip on power. Unlike the rigid ideological unity of the Cold War-era communist bloc, this new autocratic network is pragmatic, transactional, and highly adaptive.

Applebaum contends that these regimes share a common goal: to maintain and expand their power while resisting the democratic values championed by the liberal international order. This is achieved through a mix of overt and covert means, including military support, economic ties, and disinformation campaigns. In doing so, autocracies not only bolster their domestic control, rather they are collaborating to destabilise democracies by exploiting their vulnerabilities.

The book offers a panoramic view of how these regimes collaborate. For example, Russia exports disinformation expertise and mercenaries, while China provides surveillance technology and economic investment. Iran contributes military hardware and strategic alliances, while smaller autocracies like Belarus serve as staging grounds or test cases for broader strategies. Collectively, these actions form a self-reinforcing system that allows autocrats to thrive in a world that, on the surface, appears dominated by democratic ideals.

One of Applebaum's most compelling arguments is that today's autocracies are not bound by ideology but by mutual interest. Unlike the Soviet Union's ideological commitment to communism, contemporary autocrats operate under a shared understanding that collaboration serves their respective goals. This flexibility enables alliances that transcend cultural, political, and historical divides. For instance, Russia and China – historically wary of one another – have formed a robust partnership rooted in shared opposition to Western influence. Similarly, Venezuela's ideological orientation differs significantly from Iran's theocratic government, yet the two regimes find common ground in their defiance of U.S. sanctions. Applebaum's analysis highlights how these pragmatic relationships create a network of mutual reinforcement, where autocrats can rely on one another to survive international pressures.

Another critical theme in *Autocracy, Inc.* is the role of technology in enabling modern autocracies. Applebaum explores how authoritarian regimes use advanced surveillance tools to monitor dissent, manipulate information, and

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maintain control over their populations. Many of these technologies are developed in or distributed by autocratic states like China, whose expertise in mass surveillance has been exported to other regimes under the guise of “smart cities” or public safety initiatives.

Applebaum delves into the digital front of authoritarian collaboration. Social media platforms and internet manipulation allow autocracies to amplify propaganda, spread disinformation, and influence public opinion on a global scale. This digital authoritarianism not only strengthens domestic control but also weakens the democratic fabric of other nations by sowing discord, undermining trust in institutions, and polarising societies.

A particularly provocative aspect of Applebaum’s analysis is her critique of Western complicity in enabling autocratic practices. She argues that financial institutions, law firms, and public relations firms in democratic countries have played a pivotal role in laundering money, legitimising autocratic leaders and their inner circles, and helping clean up the images of autocrats through public relations campaigns. For example, oligarchs from Russia and other autocratic states frequently use Western banking systems to safeguard and invest their wealth. Legal loopholes allow authoritarian elites to shield their assets from scrutiny, while PR firms and lobbyists help shape their narratives in ways that soften international criticism. This complicity not only enriches these regimes but also gives them the tools to operate with impunity on the global stage.

Applebaum warns that the collaboration among autocracies poses a direct threat to the liberal international order. By undermining democratic institutions, spreading disinformation, and promoting authoritarian norms, these regimes seek to create a world where their model of governance is normalised or even preferred by people around the world. This destabilisation effort extends to supporting extremist movements, funding political candidates sympathetic to authoritarian ideals, and leveraging economic dependencies to coerce smaller states into compliance.

One of Applebaum’s greatest strengths as a writer and historian is her ability to combine rigorous research with compelling storytelling. Her arguments are supported by a wealth of evidence, including firsthand interviews, leaked documents, and detailed case studies. The book draws on examples from a wide range of contexts, from the manipulation of elections in Belarus to China’s Belt and Road Initiative and Russia’s influence operations in Europe and Africa. Moreover, Applebaum’s background as a journalist is evident in her ability to distil complex geopolitical dynamics into accessible, engaging narratives. She moves seamlessly between high-level analysis and vivid anecdotes, ensuring that readers understand not only the mechanisms of authoritarian collaboration but also their human impact.

The relevance of *Autocracy, Inc.* is undeniable in the context of Russia’s ongoing war against Ukraine. Applebaum’s analysis provides a framework for understanding how autocratic collaboration has sustained Russia’s ability to wage war despite extensive sanctions and international condemnation. The book also sheds light on the broader implications of authoritarian solidarity, from Iran supplying military technology to Belarus acting as a staging ground for Russian troops. Beyond Ukraine, the book resonates with broader global trends, including the erosion of democratic norms, the rise of digital authoritarianism, and the increasing polarisation of political systems. Applebaum’s insights are invaluable for policymakers, academics, and citizens seeking to understand and address these challenges.

While *Autocracy, Inc.* is a masterful exploration of the global autocratic network, some readers may find its breadth comes at the expense of depth. The book touches on a wide array of regimes and tactics but occasionally lacks a detailed analysis of specific cases. For example, the relationship between Russia and China is explored primarily through their shared opposition to the West, but less attention is given to the internal dynamics and potential friction points within their partnership. A more detailed analysis of the bromance between Putin and Xi would have helped the reader better understand the relationship between the Chinese and Russian regimes.

Additionally, while Applebaum’s critique of Western complicity is important, it might have benefited from a more extensive discussion of how democracies can reform their institutions to resist authoritarian influence. The book issues a stark warning but offers fewer actionable solutions, leaving readers to speculate on how to combat the challenges posed by autocratic collaboration.

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Anne Applebaum's *Autocracy, Inc.* is a timely and thought-provoking examination of the interconnected world of modern autocracies. By exposing the networks and mechanisms that sustain authoritarian regimes, she provides a critical understanding of the threats facing democracy in the 21st century. The book serves as both a warning and a call to action, urging readers to recognise the global nature of the autocratic challenge and to respond with coordinated efforts to defend democratic values. For those interested in geopolitics, international relations, and the defence of democracy, *Autocracy, Inc.* is an essential read. It is a sobering reminder that the battle for freedom and justice is not confined to national borders but is a global struggle against a well-organised and resourceful adversary that is constantly adapting and learning.

About the author:

Dr Stephen G. F. Hall is a Lecturer (Assistant Professor) at the University of Bath in Russian and Post-Soviet Politics. His most recent book *The Authoritarian International: Tracing how Authoritarian Regimes Learn in the Post-Soviet Space* was published with Cambridge University Press in 2023.