



# The Dictator's Learning Curve: Inside the Global Battle for Democracy

By William J. Dobson

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In this riveting anatomy of authoritarianism, acclaimed journalist William Dobson takes us inside the battle between dictators and those who would challenge their rule. Recent history has seen an incredible moment in the war between dictators and democracy—with waves of protests sweeping Syria and Yemen, and despots falling in Egypt, Tunisia, and Libya. But the Arab Spring is only the latest front in a global battle between freedom and repression, a battle that, until recently, dictators have been winning hands-down. The problem is that today's authoritarians are not like the frozen-in-time, ready-to-crack regimes of Burma and North Korea. They are ever-morphing, technologically savvy, and internationally connected, and have replaced more brutal forms of intimidation with subtle coercion. *The Dictator's Learning Curve* explains this historic moment and provides crucial insight into the fight for democracy.

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**Editorial Review**

Review

**Praise for William J. Dobson's *The Dictator's Learning Curve*:**

“Intelligent and absorbing. . . Mr. Dobson’s book, with luck, will find its way into the hands of people who aspire to be free.”

—*The New York Times*

“An essential perspective on a crucial struggle. . . Dobson is that rare thinker who combines a gift for storytelling with an understanding of how the world works.”

—Fareed Zakaria

“[Dobson] writes with exemplary clarity and a sharp eye for color. . . Timely, authoritative, and as readable as a novel, this is one of the season’s most resonant books—not least because it ends on a note of guarded hope for the future.”

—*Prospect*

“A brilliant and original analysis of the nature of modern authoritarianism.”

—Anne Applebaum, author of *Iron Curtain*, winner of the Pulitzer Prize

“[A] deft, incisive book. . . The mix of perspectives results in an impressive overview of the global struggle between authoritarian power and determined advocates of political freedom.”

—*Publishers Weekly*, starred review

“Dobson has invested time and insight, from China to Venezuela, and Egypt to Russia, trying to capture the shape-changing nature of modern authoritarianism, and the resourcefulness and wit of its opponents. . . [He] captures empathetically the skill and insight of modern neo-despots – in much the way their more successful opponents do. . . Rare is the book on dictatorship that can end on an uplifting note that its narrative carefully substantiates.”

—*Financial Times*

“William J. Dobson’s exploration of the contest between contemporary dictatorships and those who rebel against them is valuable because it offers a sober analysis of both sides. Dobson traveled nearly 100,000 miles researching this book, which takes a close look at the face of modern authoritarianism. . . His book may be about the struggle for freedom of other countries’ citizens, but there are lessons in it for the preservation of our own.”

—*The Washington Post*

“[A] thoughtful journey through formidable dictatorships of our time. . . Instead of offering caricatures of vintage dictators, Dobson observes the more dangerous trend—of dictators adopting the form of democratic governance, while draining it of any substance.”

—*The Independent*

“Dobson’s is a terrific book to argue with. And it’s hard to think of a higher compliment for a book about

Big Ideas.”

—*Christian Science Monitor*

“Says something really fresh about the world we live in.”

—Michael Burleigh, *The Telegraph's Best Books of 2012*

“After a remarkable year in which citizens of a dozen countries have challenged their authoritarian governments, readers will welcome veteran journalist Dobson’s overview of the complicated dance of adaptation by the world’s dictators and those who resist their oppressive power. . . . A timely, valuable contribution to readers’ understanding of global unrest.”

—*Booklist*

“Colorful and sharply reported.”

—*Bloomberg BusinessWeek*

“Fascinating . . . some of Dobson's most astute observations come from his reporting about China. The Chinese communists, he concludes, are the least complacent of today's modern authoritarians.”

—*Foreign Policy*

“A vivid real-time portrait of the movement for democracy. Among its virtues, Dobson’s book clarifies the ways in which the recent challenge to dictatorship represents a coordinated worldwide effort, and the ways in which each country’s struggle is unique.”

—James Fallows, national correspondent for *The Atlantic* and author of *China Airborne*

“It is hard to imagine a timelier book than this one. William Dobson provides a new framework and a new vocabulary for understanding modern authoritarianism, backed up by detailed and gripping stories of dictators and their citizen opponents in Russia, China, Venezuela, Egypt, and Malaysia. Anyone seeking to make sense of the extraordinary tide of revolutions and protests sweeping around the world will find *The Dictator's Learning Curve* an indispensable read.”

—Anne-Marie Slaughter, Bert G. Kerstetter ‘66 University Professor of Politics and International Affairs, Princeton University, and former Director of Policy Planning, U.S. State Department

“William J. Dobson vividly portrays [the] struggle against authoritarian rule . . . Dobson’s coverage of Venezuela’s internal political struggles is particularly fascinating. He had spectacular access to well-placed sources in this oil-rich country, including political prisoners.”

—*Wilson Quarterly*

“Dobson’s book ends up not only a sophisticated but also a wonderfully readable account of the latest installments in an age-old type of struggle.”

—*Pacific Standard*

“Dobson has interviewed scores of protesters, security experts, opposition political candidates, elite power brokers, and a former Egyptian police officer who, from his computer in the United States, guided protesters occupying Tahrir Square. . . . As a result, the reader gets a wide-ranging overview of political strife as we live it now.”

—*The Weekly Standard*

“Timely. . . Dobson chronicles in detail the ingenious but sinister ways in which modern authoritarian regimes are suppressing dissent.”

—*The Journal of Democracy*

“A fluid study of how heavy-handed repression by authoritarian regimes has given way to more subtle forms of control. . . . A pertinent work of journalistic research that will gain fresh meaning as authoritarian regimes both evolve and fall.”

—*Kirkus Reviews*

About the Author

**William J. Dobson** is politics and foreign affairs editor for *Slate*. He has been an editor at *Foreign Affairs*, *Newsweek International*, and *Foreign Policy*. During his tenure at *Foreign Policy*, the magazine was nominated for the coveted National Magazine Award for General Excellence each year and won top honors in 2007 and 2009. His articles and essays have appeared in *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and *The Wall Street Journal*, and he has provided analysis for ABC, CNN, CBS, MSNBC, and NPR. He lives in Washington, DC.

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*Excerpted from the Hardcover Edition*

Chapter 1?The Czar

As a KGB officer, Lieutenant Colonel Vladimir Putin had one foreign assignment. In 1985, at the age of thirty-two, Putin was stationed in Dresden, East Germany. He moved there with his wife and his one-year-old daughter, Masha; soon after they arrived, his second daughter, Katya, was born. The Putins lived in a drab apartment building. Most of their neighbors were members of the Stasi, the East German intelligence agency. But the location was convenient, putting Putin a short five-minute walk from the KGB's headquarters at 4 Angelikastrasse. As a case officer, the young Putin recruited sources, ran agents, gathered the latest scuttlebutt on East German leaders, and cabled his analysis back to Moscow. For a Soviet spy, it was fairly unremarkable stuff. What was more remarkable were the years that he lived there. Putin remained in Dresden, on the edge of the Soviet Empire, from 1985 until January 1990. He was, in other words, a witness to the collapse of a dictatorship, and of the Soviet system that followed soon thereafter.

The German Democratic Republic was a postcard of a twentieth-century totalitarian state. The Stasi had infiltrated all parts of life. It kept secret files on more than six million East Germans; in Dresden alone, the files the secret police compiled would stretch almost seven miles. According to the regime's own records, the East German government employed 97,000 people and had another 173,000 working as informants. Nearly one in every 60 citizens was somehow tied to the state's security apparatus. Even as a KGB officer, Putin was shocked at how “totally invasive” the government's surveillance was of its own citizens. He later described his time in East Germany as “a real eye-opener for me.” “I thought I was going to an Eastern European country, to the center of Europe,” he told a Russian interviewer. But it wasn't that. “It was a harshly totalitarian country, similar to the Soviet Union, only 30 years earlier.”

As a Soviet intelligence officer working in a client state, Putin very likely saw signs of East Germany's rot before others. He likely would have read the Stasi reports—many of which were sent unfiltered to Moscow—that painted an increasingly dark picture. These reports documented the rising demands of the people and described the regime's own economic record keeping as fraudulent. He would have seen the signs of a moribund economy, as government subsidies had long outstripped state revenue. In 1989, near the end, the signs of collapse were on his doorstep. There was a run on Dresden banks. At the Dresden train station,

crowds tried to fight their way onto trains bound for the West. On October 4, ten thousand East Germans gathered, and the police used truncheons and tear gas to keep them from overrunning the station to board the cars. The crowds tripled in size over the next several days.

The confusion of watching a Soviet outpost collapse around him was quickly followed by fear. The ties that bound the Stasi and the KGB were plain to anyone. The East German officers referred to their Soviet counterparts as “the friends.” Indeed, the KGB station where Putin worked was across the street from the Stasi’s offices. After the Berlin Wall was breached, Putin and his colleagues set about covering their tracks. “We destroyed everything—all our communications, our lists of contacts, and our agents’ networks. I personally burned a huge amount of material,” Putin later recalled. “We burned so much stuff that the furnace burst.” On December 6, when crowds of East Germans stormed the Stasi’s building, Putin worried that they would direct their anger across the street at him and his colleagues. And they almost did. As angry East Germans began to assemble, Putin went outside to address the crowd. Claiming he was no more than a translator, he told them it was a Soviet military organization and they should move on. Worried about the crowd’s aggressive mood, Putin called the detachment of local Soviet military officers to protect them. And he remembers being told, “We cannot do anything without orders from Moscow. And Moscow is silent.” His fear turned to alienation. “That business of ‘Moscow is silent’—I got the feeling then that the country no longer existed. That it had disappeared.”

It is hard to imagine that those years did not leave a mark on the psyche of the young intelligence officer. Putin saw firsthand the costs and inefficiencies of the East German police state. He watched as the country’s centrally planned economy fell further behind and East German officials worked furiously to hide these failings with subsidies they could never recover. And the experience brought home the weaknesses of the Soviet system that he served as well. “Actually, I thought the whole thing was inevitable,” Putin later said, referring to the fall of the Berlin Wall. “I only regretted that the Soviet Union had lost its position in Europe, although intellectually I understood that a position built on walls and dividers cannot last. But I wanted something different to rise in its place. And nothing different was proposed. That’s what hurt. They just dropped everything and went away.”

Putin saw Moscow’s failure to recognize its weaknesses and then adapt as a catastrophe. Having been its foot soldier, left practically alone to defend its interests from an angry mob, he longed for the strong, sovereign Russian state that had once been. He felt frustration that the center had never listened to the periphery. “Didn’t we warn them about what was coming? Didn’t we provide them with recommendations on how to act?” recalled Putin.

Nearly ten years later to the day, that young KGB agent would become Russia’s second president, unexpectedly replacing Boris Yeltsin as his health and personal popularity failed him. Putin’s experience from those years may explain what he meant when, later as president, he said, “He who does not regret the break-up of the Soviet Union has no heart; he who wants to revive it in its previous form has no head.”

“A Kind of Dream of the Soviet Past”

On January 1, 2000, Putin made a pledge to the Russian people. Few people he addressed that day were happy with what Russia had become. The decade that had followed the collapse of the Soviet Union had been marked by economic hardship, crisis, and unpredictability. The country’s early experiment in democracy had seemingly spawned little more than feuding politicians and fractious political parties that everyone assumed (probably rightly) were on the take. Cynicism rose as Russians came to believe that they had traded the sins of communism for the false promises of a corrupt democratic system. Worse yet, they felt as though they had been duped: they had followed the democratic model set by the West and had only been

repaid with suffering, as a few profited at the expense of everyone else. And as if to add insult to injury, their country had been reduced from a superpower to something far more middling.

The moment, therefore, was ripe for what Putin promised on the first day of the new century. Beyond the pledges of growth and renewal, Putin offered the thing that everyday Russians missed most: “stability, certainty, and the possibility of planning for the future—their own and that of their children—not one month at a time, but for years and decades.” They were welcome words to those yearning for safety and security after a decade that left Russians feeling vulnerable and forced to fend for themselves. Putin’s vision was of a strong, resilient Russia that would return to its natural place as a great power. Moscow would no longer be silent.

Although he did not spell out how this stability would be achieved, Putin’s plan gradually revealed itself. If there is one defining characteristic of Putin’s brand of authoritarianism, it is the centralization of power. If Russian politics had become too noisy, divisive, and tumultuous, Putin set out to tame it. Russia would become more stable and predictable because it would, in essence, be directed by one man and the small circle of people around him. It was, as Putin and others would sometimes describe it, a “power vertical.” Among Russia’s political and economic institutions, the Kremlin would not settle for being first among equals; everything would be subordinate to it.

Putin began with the oligarchs. These Russian tycoons, many of whom had been awarded sweetheart deals for major centers of industry like gas, minerals, and steel, had become fabulously wealthy during the years of cowboy capitalism that followed the Soviet Union’s collapse. Within two months of Putin’s inauguration, the Kremlin warned these billionaire businessmen that they would be either loyal or out of business. Those who challenged this advice quickly found themselves in exile or prison. None learned this lesson harder than the oil magnate Mikhail Khodorkovsky, who was arrested when SWAT teams stormed his corporate jet in 2003 and placed him under arrest. His prosecution was clearly politically motivated, and the trial was widely criticized for gross irregularities. Nevertheless, he remains in prison to this day, an object lesson for anyone who fails to heed Putin’s warning.

The country’s regional governors followed. In a land the size of Russia, these governors had been able to run their corners of the country as personal fiefdoms. Under Yeltsin, Kremlin edicts had been treated as suggestions, more easily ignored than enforced. This, too, would eventually come to an abrupt end. In 2005, Putin did away with the direct election of Russia’s governors, opting instead to give himself the power to appoint them. In addition, their finances would now be supervised by Kremlin loyalists, whose ranks were drawn from Putin’s friends in the KGB.

Perhaps most remarkable was the way in which Putin brought the media to heel. At the beginning of Putin’s presidency, only one of the top three television networks was state owned. Three years later, the Kremlin controlled all three. (The oligarchs who owned two of the main television networks—ORT and NTV—were forced to sell their shares or face imprisonment. Both sold and fled the country.) Kremlin cronies also began to buy up the largest-circulation newspapers and magazines. Today the Russian government controls roughly 93 percent of all media outlets. Some print publications and radio stations are still able to operate with a measure of independence; the radio station Ekho Moskvyy, for example, is one of the most critical remaining voices. But more incredible than the takeover of many Russian media companies is the degree to which the Kremlin is willing to manipulate the news—especially the news you see on TV.

Until recently, a senior Kremlin official met with the directors of the three major TV channels every Friday to plan the news coverage for the week to come. Television managers reportedly received a steady stream of phone calls throughout the week, honing how that coverage should be presented, even delving sometimes

into how a particular news story should be edited. The Kremlin is not shy about giving TV executives instructions to follow. For example, after Dmitri Medvedev became president in 2008, the television networks were instructed that news broadcasts each day were to begin with coverage of him, followed by nearly equal time for Prime Minister Putin, whether or not either of them did anything newsworthy. When I was in Moscow, I would watch the evening news just to see how bizarrely balanced the coverage between the two men would be, with each of them getting roughly the same airtime. A senior television executive at one of the networks called this rule “the principle of informational parity.” A journalist from Russian Newsweek reported on visiting one of the state-controlled radio stations. While there, he saw notes in front of the radio announcers reminding them to “say only good things about Kazakhstan” and “don’t mention that Dmitri and Svetlana Medvedev arrived to the summit separately.”

The Kremlin wasn’t satisfied with simply taming billionaires, governors, and media heads, though; it also sought to stage-manage politics. From as far back as his Millennium Statement, Putin always stressed the need for political and social unity. He naturally sought to extend this cohesion to the realm of political parties, which had been among the most unpredictable and fractious players in post-Communist Russia. But Putin and his team did not wish to crush all opposition with a single dominant ruling party. Rather, they engineered space for a small handful of opposition parties to exist and in some instances invented the parties out of whole cloth. These parties—typically referred to as the systemic opposition—ostensibly play the role of regime critics while never pushing their criticism beyond the boundaries set by the Kremlin. In their ideological orientation, these opposition voices are intended to represent social interests—namely, nationalists, the poor, and older voters—who may feel neglected or dissatisfied with the ruling party, United Russia. But they regularly demonstrate their fealty, as in December 2007, when the heads of each so-called opposition party publicly informed Putin that they could think of no one better to lead Russia than his longtime aide Dmitri Medvedev. Putin could then tell the TV public that since the nomination of Medvedev came from different parties that represented “the most different strata of Russian society,” Medvedev was clearly the choice of the people.

The degree to which Putin concentrated power in the center cannot be overstated. According to the Russian journal *Ekspert*, which is edited by a confidant of senior Kremlin advisers, the number of officials who had serious influence over national policy and politics from 2002 to 2007 dropped from two hundred to fifty. This pro-government publication admitted that this list of fifty officials reads “almost like a telephone book of the [presidential] administration.” But this centralization of power should not be understood as an attempt to achieve total control of all aspects of Russian life. Rather, it is something more precise.

## **Users Review**

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**Thelma Davis:**

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