Hitler, Stalin, and Mao ruled through violence, fear, and ideology. But in recent decades a new breed of media-savvy strongmen has been redesigning authoritarian rule for a more sophisticated, globally connected world. In place of overt mass repression, rulers such as Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Viktor Orbán control their citizens by distorting information and simulating democratic procedures. Like spin doctors in democracies, they spin the news to engineer support. Uncovering this new brand of authoritarianism, Sergei Guriev and co-author Daniel Treisman explain the rise of such “spin dictators” in their latest book, describing how they emerge and operate, the new threats they pose, and how democracies should respond.

Where does Putin rank in this taxonomy? For Guriev, one thing is clear: Putin has miscalculated the war in Ukraine. His narrative has become increasingly hard to spin, and that is why he has changed his strategy. “Putin’s regime has completed its reversion from a 21st century spin dictatorship to a 20th century dictatorship based on fear.”