

# [***Potemkin Suffrage: The Media Should Call Out Fake Elections | Opinion***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6BK8-JXH1-JBR6-92VG-00000-00&context=1516831)

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**Highlight:** All over Russia this past weekend, subjects of Forever-President Vladimir Putin travelled to places called polling stations where they went through motions that looked a lot like voting.

**Body**

All over Russia this past weekend, subjects of Forever-President [*Vladimir Putin*](https://www.newsweek.com/topic/vladimir-putin?utm_source=Synacor&utm_medium=Attnet&utm_campaign=Partnerships) travelled to places called polling stations where they went through motions that looked a lot like voting. There were ballots with names on them, one of whom was Putin—but an election it was not. As a longtime journalist, I'd like to propose that language be respected.

The media dislikes controversy. The business model is battered already, and while taking sides may please some readers, it could upset others. The arc of editors bends toward least resistance, which is to accept what's on the label. Dictators exploit this well.

In olden days, when despotic regimes were the norm, they owned their evil without complaint. Genghis Khan may have held some consultations, but he proudly was an autocrat. There is some honor there. Putin, like others today, prefers to play games. Hence his [*Potemkin*](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Potemkin-village) suffrage.

Putin's regime does not brook free speech nor allow others a shot at replacing him. The first public figure who dared challenge him, energy tycoon Mikhail Khodorkovsky, was thrown in jail for a decade by a kangaroo court. He is now in respectful exile, having been being released in 2013. The last was opposition activist [*Alexei Navalny*](https://www.newsweek.com/topic/alexei-navalny?utm_source=Synacor&utm_medium=Attnet&utm_campaign=Partnerships), similarly jailed on nonsense charges, who "mysteriously" died in an Arctic prison last month.

There was no chance anyone but Putin would be declared the winner of the March 15-17 sham balloting, as there was no contest. Even if some voters mustered the courage to write in a real regime critic—like Navalny's widow, Yulia—the count would be falsified.

Why does the regime bother with the fakery? Because it wants at least some people to be fooled. There is benefit in creating a narrative of legitimacy, even if most people know it to be false.

France's Louis XIV declared "L'etat c'est moi" (I am the state), and left it at that, but today's despots pretend to speak in the name of the people, as if their rule were legitimate. They flood the zone with competing narratives and "alternative facts," so that anyone not paying supremely close attention might actually believe it. To whatever extent this works, it discourages both domestic opposition and outside meddling, including NGOs with their unflattering global rankings, economic boycotts or arms embargos, unflattering journalistic attention, and so on.

So, they hold their fake elections and they hope for coverage that is brief, superficial and acquiescent. They want the media to collaborate simply by calling what happens "elections." Writing about "balloting," referencing puppet "candidates," terming the outcome a "win"—all this craven credulity abets a crime against a captive population.

Why would the media collaborate? For the same reason that they have such trouble in referring to terrorism as "terrorism." To do otherwise carries the whiff of the taking of a side and justifying doing so is too hard. (Unless you're sure the audience is with you, of course. The word terrorism flew off U.S. journalists' keyboards after 9/11).

So how was Russia covered? Behold, a few examples:

*The New York Times* wasted no time in doing Putin's bidding like a journalistic [*Donald Trump*](https://www.newsweek.com/topic/donald-trump?utm_source=Synacor&utm_medium=Attnet&utm_campaign=Partnerships). The [*headlines*](https://www.nytimes.com/2024/03/17/world/europe/russia-election-mood.html) referred to the certain outcome of Putin's "win" as him being "re-elected."

The [*Guardian's headline*](https://www.theguardian.com/world/live/2024/mar/17/russia-ukraine-war-live-vote-presidential-election-kremlin-kyiv-vladimir-putin) Sunday said: "Thousands reportedly protest against Putin in final day of presidential election." The subheadline said that Putin is "guaranteed to win"—as one might say of France's [*Emmanuel Macron*](https://www.newsweek.com/topic/emmanuel-macron?utm_source=Synacor&utm_medium=Attnet&utm_campaign=Partnerships) when he's leading in the polls.

Reuters' headline absurdly declared "[*Russia election to tighten Putin's grip*](https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/russias-presidential-vote-starts-final-day-with-accusations-kyiv-sabotage-2024-03-17/)"—when in fact the fake election reflects a grip that would struggle to get any tighter. The first paragraph said the so-called election was "certain to deliver him a landslide victory," and the next one credited him with a likely "win" for a new "six-year term" that would make him the longest "serving" Russian "leader" in 200 years. Readers might see Putin's achievement as little different from [*Boris Johnson*](https://www.newsweek.com/topic/boris-johnson?utm_source=Synacor&utm_medium=Attnet&utm_campaign=Partnerships)'s 2019 UK landslide. Voters like their leader!

I would argue that dictators are not exactly "leaders" and they most definitely are not "serving" but rather are "usurping."

The Associated Press, where I toiled for several decades, and where for a time I supervised the coverage of Russia, was probably the least pathetic. The [*main story's headline*](https://apnews.com/article/russia-election-putin-2024-updates-d4dcaa5c93dc44b745cec7d811831daa) did not refer to an "election" but just said Putin was set to "extend his rule," and included key facts to suggest the truth about the process, referencing the "relentless crackdown on dissent" and a "tightly controlled environment where there are no real alternatives to Putin." It also noted the absence of international observers and cited unnamed Western leaders as deriding the "travesty of democracy."

But AP also gave high participation figures from the government—an outfit that lies without the slightest compunction—without questioning them. It described citizens as "voting." It obligingly referred to Navalny as having "died" in prison—at the age of 47, days after a video showed him robust, smiling and breathing without assistance—without mentioning the rather credible claims by supporters that he was murdered.

Most cringingly, it quoted several people by name praising Putin—such as one "Dmitry Sergienko" who asserted that "I am happy with everything and want everything to continue as it is now." This, in a country where dissent is essentially criminalized.

Here's what I think should have happened instead, whenever journalists encounter these spectacles that one might call kabuki elections. Every report should have made crystal clear to the audience that this is not an election but a transparent self-selection—a sham exercise that in no way constitutes what an election is in a democracy, and whose only purpose is to enable Putin to lie about having held and won one. Readers should understand that no claim from the government should be believed and no comment from a person under the threat of Putin's thugs should be taken at face value.

There should be no deploying of terms that might even hint otherwise, up to and including any reporting of "results." The bulk of the reporting should amount to an effort to uncover, to whatever extent is possible, the truth about Russia public opinion. And even then, it should never be forgotten that those opinions are distorted and manipulated by regime control of the media, which keeps people clueless about their own circumstances.

This is a case in which cynicism really is realism.

It would be important not only in order to avoid collaborating with criminals, or to do the right thing for long-suffering Russia, but as a service to all democracies. Each acquiescence strengthens the global cabal of autocrats who feed off each other and are striving toward the tipping point where the major democracies fall (and one is them is teetering).

Moreover, maintaining clarity respects the true role of journalism in society. Ours is not merely to report the facts, as some will declare with self-righteous false humility. Any given millisecond produces more facts than can be reported. Ours is to pick out the *important* facts and to make sense of them. In search of knowledge. In aid of understanding.

Some journalists, of course, prefer the lower altitudes. Some may fear calling out the autocrats for fear of reprisal or a desire for access. That is quite shameful. Complicity so craven erodes trust in journalism at a time when this is ill afforded.

It comes back to the inescapable philosophical debate about the nature of truth, at a time when truth is assaulted from all corners of ***politics***. Language can both clarify and obfuscate. The philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein argued that "the limits of my language mean the limits of my world." Let's not confine our world to the likes of Vladimir Putin.

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*The views expressed in this article are the writer's own.*

[*Link to Image*](https://d.newsweek.com/en/full/2363613/victor.jpg)

**Graphic**

The Victor?

NATALIA KOLESNIKOVA/POOL/AFP via Getty Images

Russian President Vladimir Putin meets with the media at his campaign headquarters in Moscow on March 18.

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