

The Blindness of Power

*Why Control-Obsessed Governance Fails—and What It Means
for Every Regime*

A global synthesis on the structural limits of authoritarian, populist, and strongman
governance.

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The Clouded Mirror · Reader's Guide

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In the early hours of February 24, 2022, Russian forces crossed the Ukrainian border with a plan predicated on a set of assumptions: Kyiv would fall in three days. Ukrainian resistance would collapse. The Zelensky government would flee. Western resolve would fracture. Each of these assumptions was catastrophically wrong. The invasion stalled, then reversed. The resistance hardened. The West, after years of division, coalesced around a sanctions and military aid package of unprecedented scale. The plan failed not because Russian soldiers were incompetent or because Russian generals were poorly trained. It failed because the system that produced the plan could not perceive the reality it was acting upon.

The Russian power vertical—the hierarchical chain of authority that concentrates decision-making in a single figure at the top—is not merely a political structure. It is an observation architecture. And it is designed to destroy the very information its leader most needs. Every subordinate who filters intelligence to avoid displeasing a superior, every general who reports what the Kremlin wants to hear rather than what the battlefield reveals, every statistical agency that quietly adjusts its methodology to keep the numbers politically acceptable—each of these is a sensor being deliberately disabled. The system is not blind because it lacks data. It is blind because it has been optimised to punish accurate reporting. The Control-Blindness-Shock Loop—centralise control, suppress feedback, grow blind, experience catastrophic shock, re-centralise to regain control—is the structural signature of a governance architecture that has crossed a critical threshold. The dashboard shows strength. The architecture is dissolving.

This is not a story about Russia. It is a story about the structural limits of any governance system that prioritises control over perception. And it is a story with implications that extend far beyond authoritarian regimes, because the same dynamics—the narrowing of observation channels, the punishment of inconvenient signals, the progressive detachment of the decision layer from the reality it must govern—are operating, in different forms, across the political spectrum. The Variety Gap is not a pathology of democracy or autocracy. It is a condition that any governance architecture can develop, and that all are developing now.

The Temptation of Control

The appeal of strongman governance is not mysterious. In a world of accelerating complexity, the promise of decisive action, clear authority, and the restoration of order is genuinely compelling. Democratic systems appear slow, gridlocked, and captured by interests that have learned to manipulate long representation chains. The strongman promises to cut through the noise: to see the problem directly, to act without delay, to deliver results that the cumbersome machinery of liberal governance cannot.

This promise is built on a structural error. The strongman does not eliminate the observation channel. He concentrates it. All information must flow through a single point. All decisions must emanate from that point. The channel becomes shorter in one sense—fewer layers of formal aggregation—and catastrophically narrower in another. The variety of the disturbance environment—the full range of economic, social, ecological, and geopolitical signals that any governance system must track to remain stable—cannot be

perceived by a single observer, however intelligent, however well-briefed, however ruthlessly decisive. The channel's bandwidth is determined not by the quality of the leader but by the architecture of the system. And an architecture that routes all signals through a single node is an architecture that systematically destroys the variety those signals carry.

The result is not better decisions made faster. It is fast decisions made on degraded information, followed by slow-motion catastrophes that the degraded information cannot anticipate. The Russian invasion of Ukraine. The Chinese zero-COVID policy, enforced for three years at extraordinary cost, then reversed overnight with no transition plan. The repeated strategic surprises that punctuate the history of every highly centralised governance system. These are not failures of intelligence. They are structural outputs of an architecture that treats perception as a threat.

The Control Preservation Imperative is the immune system of authoritarian governance. It correctly identifies independent feedback channels—a free press, an autonomous statistical agency, a judiciary that can rule against the state, a civil society that can surface inconvenient truths—as existential threats to the system's operating logic. It neutralises them. And in doing so, it destroys the observation channels on which the system's own long-run viability depends. The immune system is not a defect. It is the predictable, rational behaviour of an architecture whose survival logic requires it to suppress the signals that would reveal its own dysfunction. The tragedy is that the suppression works. For a time, the dashboard shows the leader what he wants to see. And then the excluded dimensions force themselves into visibility through crisis—a battlefield defeat, an economic collapse, a population that suddenly, to the system's genuine astonishment, is no longer afraid.

The Measurement Paradox in Authoritarian Systems

The Measurement Paradox—the finding that a governance system with a degraded observation channel cannot perceive the extent of its own degradation—reaches its terminal expression in the authoritarian case. In a democracy, independent institutions provide some residual capacity to detect the gap between the official picture and reality. The press may be weakened, but it still exists. The statistical agency may be pressured, but its raw data may still be accessible. The opposition may be marginalised, but it can still ask questions in parliament. These channels are degraded, but they are not destroyed.

In a fully realised authoritarian architecture, they are destroyed. The press is state-controlled. The statistical agency's methodologies are classified. The opposition is imprisoned, exiled, or dead. The leader is surrounded by people who have learned, through bitter experience, that conveying unwelcome information is career-ending or worse. The system has not just narrowed its observation channel. It has deliberately dismantled the alternative channels that could reveal the narrowness. It cannot see what it cannot see, and it has removed the mirrors that might show it the blind spot.

This is why the Russian general staff believed Kyiv would fall in three days. The intelligence apparatus had been purged of anyone who might report inconvenient truths about the readiness of Russian forces, the resilience of Ukrainian society, or the cohesion of the Western alliance. The remaining analysts had learned to produce assessments that confirmed the leadership's priors. The leader, receiving uniformly optimistic reports from every channel he had not yet destroyed, had no way of knowing—could have no way of knowing—that the reports were a Potemkin village. The system was not misinformed. It was structurally incapable of being informed. The Control-Blindness-Shock Loop had completed its cycle.

China exhibits a more complex form of the paradox. The Chinese state maintains extensive data collection infrastructure, publishes a vast array of economic and social indicators, and employs sophisticated analytical capacity. The Calibration Deficit is not a failure of data availability. It is a failure of data *utilisation* when the action the data demands would threaten the centre's authority. The information exists. It is published. It is discussed in technical circles. It cannot enter the decision-making channels that would force a response. The immune system operates not by removing data but by making it operationally invisible—acknowledged in theory, ignored in practice, until the gap between the official narrative and the underlying reality grows so large that it can no longer be managed by the existing architecture.

The zero-COVID reversal is the paradigmatic case. For three years, the policy was enforced with extraordinary rigour. Local officials whose careers depended on demonstrating compliance over-executed. Obstacles were under-reported. The gap between the policy's effects and the official representation of those effects widened continuously. The leadership, receiving reports calibrated to what it wanted to hear, had no mechanism for perceiving the accumulating social and economic damage. When the reversal came, it was not an orderly transition. It was a sudden abandonment, overnight, of a policy that had been publicly defended as essential—because the system's own observation architecture had made it impossible to correct course incrementally.

The Populist Variant in Democratic Systems

The same dynamics operate in democratic systems, in a less terminal but still corrosive form. Populist leaders who describe themselves as the sole authentic voice of the people are making an observational claim: that the standard representation chain—the media, the parties, the institutions—is corrupt, and that the leader perceives the people's will directly. The claim is structurally identical to the strongman's promise: that the observation channel can be shortened to a single point without loss of fidelity.

The claim is false. The leader does not perceive the people's will directly. He perceives a selected, amplified, and distorted sample of it—the crowds at his rallies, the metrics on his social media posts, the adulation of his inner circle, the flattery of subordinates who have learned what he wants to hear. The channel is narrow. The excluded dimensions accumulate. The leader's model of the public diverges from the public. The

divergence is invisible to the channel that produced it. The crisis, when it arrives—an electoral defeat that the leader's internal polling said was impossible, a policy backlash that the leader's advisors assured him was marginal—appears to come from nowhere.

The Escalate-Block-Bypass-Delegitimise spiral documented in the United States is a democratic variant of the Control-Blindness-Shock Loop. The escalation of executive authority in response to legislative gridlock. The blocking of independent oversight. The bypassing of standard inter-agency coordination in favour of personal loyalty networks. The delegitimation of any institution—courts, media, electoral authorities—that produces signals contradicting the leader's narrative. Each step in the spiral is a response to the failure of the previous step. Each step further degrades the observation channels that might have prevented the next failure. The system is not collapsing into authoritarianism in a single decisive break. It is degrading gradually, along dimensions its own degraded observation channels cannot track.

The Unity of the Diagnosis

The Variety Gap does not distinguish between regime types. It applies to any governance architecture that attempts to stabilise a complex, multi-dimensional disturbance environment with an observation channel of insufficient variety. The specific mechanisms differ. Democratic systems degrade their observation channels through aggregation—too many layers between the local sensor and the central decision-maker. Authoritarian systems degrade theirs through suppression—the active destruction of independent sensors. Populist systems degrade theirs through personalisation—the replacement of institutional observation with the narrow, distorted channel of a single figure's perception. The outcome is the same: the system governs a simplified model of reality that diverges from reality itself, and the divergence is invisible to the model.

This is not a counsel of equivalence. The differences between regime types are real and consequential. A democratic system with a degraded observation channel can still, in principle, be corrected—the channels still exist, however attenuated, and the immune system is less comprehensively lethal to those who attempt to use them. An authoritarian system that has reached the terminal stage of the Control-Blindness-Shock Loop has destroyed the channels that would be needed for correction. The Measurement Paradox is absolute. The only remaining mechanism for reality re-entry is catastrophic shock.

But the structural diagnosis reveals something that the standard political discourse misses: the strongman's promise is not merely morally objectionable. It is architecturally incoherent. The claim to perceive reality directly, without the distortions of institutional intermediation, is a claim to do the impossible—to process a high-dimensional environment through a low-dimensional observation channel without information loss. The information loss is not a bug that a sufficiently strong leader can overcome. It is a structural necessity, built into the mathematics of variety. The system that centralises perception in a single figure is not gaining clarity. It is guaranteeing blindness, at a speed determined by how quickly it destroys the remaining alternative channels.

The Global Variety Gap

The current geopolitical moment is often described as a contest between democracy and autocracy, or between the liberal international order and its challengers. The Variety Gap framework suggests a different reading. All of the major governance architectures on earth—democratic, authoritarian, and hybrid—are experiencing a widening gap between the complexity of their disturbance environments and the dimensionality of their observation channels. The acceleration asymmetry—the mismatch between the rate at which the world generates novel disturbance dimensions and the rate at which governance institutions expand to perceive them—is not confined to any one regime type. It is a global condition.

Climate change, artificial intelligence, demographic collapse, information ecosystem fragmentation, pandemic emergence, supply chain fragility, financial system complexity—these are not challenges that any existing governance architecture was designed to perceive, let alone govern. They are generators of new disturbance dimensions, arriving at a rate that exceeds the adaptation capacity of every institutional form currently on offer. The Variety Gap is widening everywhere. And the political convulsions of the present—the rise of strongman governance, the collapse of centrist establishments, the erosion of democratic norms, the fragmentation of the international order—are not the cause of this widening. They are its symptoms. They are what happens when governance systems that cannot perceive the sources of their own instability attempt to respond to crises they cannot explain.

The strongman is not the solution to the complexity crisis. He is the complexity crisis, expressed in political form. He promises to cut through the noise, and instead becomes the mechanism by which the noise is amplified—because his architecture destroys the very sensors that might have distinguished signal from noise. The liberal democratic system is not the automatic alternative. Its own observation channels are degraded by aggregation, latency, and the immune responses of interests that benefit from the current narrowness. Neither side of the supposed civilisational contest has an architecture capable of perceiving the world it must govern. Both are operating below the constitutional unobservability threshold. Both are governing phantoms.

The question is not which side wins. The question is whether any side can build the meta-governance capacity to perceive the gap before it becomes unbridgeable.

The Invitation

This paper has not been about Russia, or China, or the United States. It has been about the structural limits of any governance architecture that attempts to govern a complex world with an insufficiently dimensional observation channel. Those limits apply everywhere. They apply to the strongman who believes he can perceive reality directly and discovers, too late, that he has been governing a flattering reflection. They apply to the democratic leader who responds to national indicators that have destroyed the local signals she most needs. They apply to the central bank governor who optimises for inflation while the financial system

accumulates fragility in dimensions the models cannot see. They apply to the international institution that negotiates climate targets while the Earth system approaches thresholds the targets were never calibrated to prevent.

The diagnosis is not a prophecy of doom. It is an identification of the structural requirements for governance to become viable again. Those requirements—shorter observation channels, higher signal fidelity, multi-dimensional monitoring, fractal distribution of authority across timescales, protected feedback loops, and a permanent meta-governance capacity to evolve the value architecture as the world changes—are demanding. They are not impossible. The fragments of the necessary architecture exist, in every system the research programme has examined. They exist in the municipal laboratories, the bioregional pilots, the citizens' assemblies, the indigenous governance systems that never lost the dimensional richness that modern administration has systematically destroyed.

The first step is the same everywhere: create a protected experimental space where the observation channel is shorter, the signal is less degraded, and the results are visible enough to challenge the broader system's model of its own dysfunction. Not a grand reform. Not a constitutional revolution. A municipal laboratory with genuine authority over a specific domain. A bioregional governance pilot that matches decision boundaries to ecological boundaries. A deliberative assembly with a binding mandate on a tractable question. An AI-assisted value audit that makes the Variety Gap visible to the decision-makers and citizens whose choices determine whether it widens or closes.

The strongman cannot do this. His architecture is built on the destruction of independent observation. The democrat cannot do it by relying on the existing representation chains; they are too long, too slow, too aggregated. Both must build something new at the periphery, protect it fiercely, and let the evidence accumulate until the cost of maintaining the current architecture becomes undeniable. The invitation is not to choose a side in the geopolitical contest. It is to recognise that the contest itself is a symptom of a deeper structural condition, and that the only viable response is to build the perceptual infrastructure that no existing system can provide on its own.

The clouded mirror is not a metaphor. It is a condition. It afflicts the Kremlin, the White House, Zhongnanhai, and the parliamentary chambers of every democracy whose representation chains have grown longer than the signal can survive. The measurement of the gap—the honest, rigorous, unflinching assessment of what our governance architectures can actually perceive—is the first act of reconstruction. It begins here. It does not end here. The invitation is open to all. The gap does not discriminate. Neither should the work of closing it.