

## **Sovereign democracy", Russian-style**

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### **The Russian governing elite is adapting conservative European intellectual models of political hegemony to justify its rule and consolidate its power, says Ivan Krastev.**

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Putin's Russia is not a trivial authoritarian state. It is not "Soviet Union lite". It is not a liberal democracy either. It is, however, a "managed democracy". The term captures the logic and the mechanisms of the reproduction of power and the way democratic institutions are used and misused to preserve the monopoly of power.

But the concept of managed democracy is also insufficient. It cannot illuminate Vladimir Putin's Russia considered not as a power machine but as a political ambition. It cannot explain why Putin resists becoming president-for-life; why, unlike his central Asian colleagues, he has declared his intention to step down at the end of his second constitutional term in 2008. It cannot explain what distinguish Putin's concept of sovereign democracy and Hugo Chàvez's concept of sovereign democracy.

What is missing in western attempts to make sense of Putin's Russia is an insight in the political imagination of the current political elite in Moscow. What is missing is an interest in the arguments with which the regime claims legitimacy. Carl Schmitt could be right when some fifty years ago he noted that "the victor feels no curiosity".

*Sovereignty*, a recently published volume of ideological writings edited by Nikita Garadya presents a promising opportunity to glimpse into the political imagination of Putin's elite.

The volume is a compendium of excerpts from the president's state of the union speeches, newspaper interviews with one of his possible "successors" (deputy prime minister Dmitri Medvedev), the legendary February theses of Kremlin's ideologue-in-chief Vladislav Surkov delivered in front of the activists of United Russia, and a dozen essays and interviews in the tradition of enlightened loyalism.

The book's ambition is to define and develop the master-concept of Kremlin's newfound ideology: the concept of sovereign democracy. The contributors - philosophers, journalists and military strategists - are regarded as key members of Putin's ideological special forces.

The unexpected presence in the book is François Guizot (1787-1874), French political philosopher and the country's prime minister in the days of the July monarchy. Guizot missed the opportunity to become a trusted member of Putin's inner circle but the decision of the editor to include excerpts from his writings on sovereignty in the volume is the real message of the book.

Carl Schmitt (1888-1985) - the crown jurist of the Third Reich and the leading figure of the

modern European anti-liberal tradition - is the other powerful intellectual presence that can be detected in the official philosophy of the new Russian sovereignists. His influence can be felt in many of the pages of the book but his "Nazi connection" made him unpublishable in a Kremlin-inspired book.

The truth is that in comparison with the masterpieces of ideological literature such as Stalin's *Short Course on the History of the Russian Communist Party (Bolsheviks)*, *Sovereignty* is a clumsy and mediocre reading. The new Kremlin's ideologues are not philosophers but public-relations specialists. Reading their reflections on the merits of sovereign democracy is not intellectually inspiring.

But a sarcastic response would be to miss the point. Sovereign democracy is an ideologically potent concept. Its ambition is not to explain the world but to change it. It succeeds in confronting Kremlin's two ideological enemies of choice: the liberal democracy of the west and the populist democracy admired by the rest.

### **"Sovereign democracy": the political origin**

By nationality the concept of sovereign democracy is Ukrainian. It has its origin in the Kremlin's conceptualisation of the orange revolution (*orange technologies* in Kremlin's terms) of November 2004 to January 2005 in Ukraine. This lineage can be tracked in Surkov's thesis, reprinted in *Sovereignty*. Sovereign democracy is Moscow's response to the dangerous combination of populist pressure from below and international pressure from above that destroyed the Leonid Kuchma regime.

The Kyiv (Kiev) events embodied the ultimate threat: long-distance controlled popular revolt. Putin's preventive counter-revolution that followed marked a profound transformation of the regime of managed democracy in Russia.

In the regime of "directed democracy" that Putin inherited from Boris Yeltsin, elites deployed such institutional elements of democracy as political parties, elections, and diverse media for the sole purpose of helping those in power to stay in power. Elections were held regularly, but they did not provide an opportunity to transfer power, only to legitimise it. The "directed democracy" of the 1990s, in contrast to the classical models of managed democracy, did not imply a ruling party to manage the political process. The key to the system was the creation of a parallel political reality. The goal was not just to establish a monopoly of power but to monopolise the competition for it.

The key element in the model of directed democracy was that the sources of the legitimacy of the regime lay in the west. The project of faking democracy assumes that the faker accepts the superiority of the model he fakes. Being lectured by the west was the price that Russian elite paid for using the resources of the west to preserve its power.

In its social origins, directed democracy reflected the strange relations between the rulers and the ruled in Yeltsin's Russia. Stephen Holmes has acutely portrayed this relationship: "Those at the top neither exploit nor oppress those at the bottom. They do not even govern

them; they simply ignore them."

Directed democracy was a political regime that liberates the elites from the necessity of governing and gives them time to take care of their personal business. It was perceived as the best instrument for avoiding a bloody revolution; at the same time, it created room for the "criminal revolution" that transferred much of the nation's wealth into the hands of few powerful insiders. It was the most suitable regime for a "non-taxing state".

When government taxes people, it has to provide benefits in return: beginning with services, accountability, and good governance, but ending with liberty and representation. This reciprocal exchange between taxation and representation is what gives government legitimacy in the modern world. Russia's directed democracy in the 1990s succeeded in perverting this logic.

There were taxes in Russia, but nobody really cared to collect them; there were elections, but they were not allowed to represent real interests. Post-communist elites discovered the irresistible charm of state weakness. Russia was a weak state, but it was also a cunning state, one that was quite selective in its weakness. It failed to pay the salaries of workers, but was strong enough to redistribute property and even to repay foreign debts when this was in the interests of the elites. The regime's strategy was to keep up the illusion of political representation while at the same time preventing the interests and sentiments of the transition's losers from being represented.

The model of directed democracy made the elites independent of citizens' legitimate claims. None of the reforms implemented in Russia in the heyday of directed democracy was initiated by pressure from below. It is this total disregard for the basic needs of the people that constitutes the most vulnerable spot of Russia's system.

In the current western discourse on Russia, Putin's authoritarianism is usually contrasted with the imperfect democracy of Yeltsin's Russia in the way that tyranny contrasts with freedom. In reality, Yeltsin's liberalism and Putin's sovereigntism represent two distinctive but related forms of managed democracy.

Yeltsin's "faking of democracy" was replaced by Putin's consolidation of the state power through nationalisation of the elite and the elimination or marginalisation of what Vladislav Surkov calls "offshore aristocracy".

The nationalisation of the elite took the form of *de facto* nationalisation of the energy sector, total control of the media, *de facto* criminalisation of the western-funded NGOs, Kremlin-sponsored party-building, criminal persecution of Kremlin's opponents (the case of Mikhail Khodorkovsky) and the creation of structures that can secure active support for the regime in the time of crisis (such as the *Nashi* [Ours] movement).

In the view of the Kremlin, sovereignty is not a right; its meaning is not a seat in the United Nations. For the Kremlin, sovereignty is a capacity. It implies economic independence, military strength and cultural identity.

The other key element of the sovereign state is a "nationally-minded" elite. The nature of the elite in the view of the Kremlin's ideologues is the critical component of the sovereign state. The creation of the nationally-minded elite is the primarily task of the sovereign democracy as a project. Moreover, the need for a nationally-minded elite requires a nationally-minded democratic theory.

### **Sovereign democracy: the intellectual origin**

What is really fascinating in the concept of sovereign democracy is not the regime it tries to legitimise but the intellectual framework of its justification. In the last two decades Russia's market of ideas was never short of theories arguing about the uniqueness of her culture and history and reflections on Russia's mission in the world. There were many voices insisting that Russia should break its ideological dependence on western theories.

What is telling is that the ideologues of sovereign democracy are not interested in the various "Russian uniqueness" theories in building their project. The Kremlin's revolt against the Anglo-Saxon theory of liberal democracy centred on individual rights, and the system of checks and balances of powers, is not rooted either in criticism of democracy as a form of government or in the theories of Russia's exceptionalism.

In constructing the intellectual justification of the model of sovereign democracy Kremlin's ideologues turned to the intellectual legacy of continental Europe - the French political rationalism of Francois Guizot and Carl Schmitt's "decisionism".

Guizot and Schmitt surprisingly emerge as the intellectual pillars of Kremlin's idea of sovereign democracy. What attracts Surkov and his philosophers in the legacies of Guizot and Schmitt is obviously their anti-revolutionism and their fundamental mistrust towards the two concepts of the present democratic age - the idea of representation as the expression of the pluralist nature of the modern society and the idea of popular sovereignty that defines democracy as the rule of the popular will. Anti-populism and anti-pluralism are the two distinctive features of the current regime in Moscow.

Following Schmitt (1888-1985), the theorists of sovereign democracy prefer to define democracy as "identity of the governors and the governed" (see Jan-Werner Müller, *A Dangerous Mind: Carl Schmitt in Post-War European Thought*, Yale University Press, 2003). And, following Guizot, the sovereign for them is not the people or the voters but the reason embodied in the consensus of the responsible national elites (see Pierre Rosanvallon, *Democracy Past and Future*, Columbia University Press, 2006).

In the Kremlin-made mixture of Guizot's anti-populism and Schmitt's anti-liberalism elections serve not as an instrument for expressing different and conflicting interests but in demonstrating the identity of the governors and the governed; not an mechanism for representing people but one for representing power in front of the people.

Schmitt's definition of the sovereign as "he who decides on the state of exception" perfectly fits the almost metaphysical role of the figure of the president in the Russian political system today. Schmitt's definition of democracy in the terms of identity and not in the

terms of representation does not allow a meaningful distinction between democracy and dictatorship. And this could also count as an advantage in the eyes of Kremlin's theorists of democracy.

### **Russia's model for Europe?**

Putin's critics inside and outside Russia are inclined to dismiss the intellectual substance of the concept of "sovereign democracy". What they are interested is the nature of the regime and not how the regime tries to represent and legitimise itself. In their view "sovereign democracy" has only propaganda value. Its only function is to protect the regime from the criticism of the west. In other words sovereign democracy is defensive weaponry.

A close reading of *Sovereignty* can profoundly change this perception. The Kremlin is not in a defensive mood. The concept of sovereign democracy embodies Putin's Russian nostalgia for the power of ideological attraction enjoyed by the Soviet Union. The search for soft power is what characterises Russia's return to the world stage. The dynamism of the energy sector and the attractiveness of sovereign democracy are the two weapons of choice in Russia's current march on Europe. Contrary to the assertions of Putin's critics, the concept of sovereign democracy does not mark Russia's break with European tradition. It embodies Russia's ideological ambition to be "the *other* Europe" - an alternative to the European Union.

This raises a key question: could Putin's cocktail of Guizot and Schmitt appeal to European elites demoralised by the rise of populism and the pressure of globalization? Could Russia's political model - the combination of elite control and classical state sovereignty - become a pole of attraction for the people and elites of Europe disenchanted with the magic of the post-modern state embodied in the European Union?

The politically correct answer is that democratic Europe could not be seduced by the model of Putin's sovereign democracy. The right answer is that time will tell. What is safe to predict is that "sovereign democracy" as a concept and as a reality would be more attractive to the elites than to the peoples of Europe.