

Sovereign Democracy: A New Russian Idea Or a PR Project?

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The absence of a grand systemic project for Russia's modernization, as well as vagueness in the contours and inarticulate formulation of "the Putin course," meaning a lack of formalized goals and inmost notions in words, ideologemes and imagery, can be justly viewed as one of Russia's major problems during Vladimir Putin's presidency.

PUTIN'S DISCOURSE

From the very start the new authorities positioned their essence, goals and tasks by manifesting their intentions through a rejection of the past, showing that Putin's regime was not the same as Yeltsin's. They wanted to show that it differed from the rule of repressive oligarchs and had nothing to do with managerial chaos, the decay of the state, and surrendering international positions. The political regime formulated the goals of restoring the vertically integrated state power and regaining the subjectness in international policy as the opposite to the realities of the Boris Yeltsin era. But there is still a short supply of positive content in development strategies.

All political regimes throughout Russian history have had a short supply of supreme motivations and ideas about long-term

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goals and meanings about the country's development, and this poses a serious threat to the country's existence. Given the specificity of Russia's infrastructures, a transition to strictly pragmatic utilitarian motivations cannot ensure social mobilization and hence is not efficacious. A state like this can exist without an ideology or clearly articulated values and priorities for a certain period of time, but eventually it will slide into a serious break down of the political regime, a crisis of the elite, de-modernization and anarchy even if there is economic stability. When meanings are replaced by figures, the sense of existence grows shallow in the final run.

Vladimir Putin's conceptual statements and his annual state of the nation addresses to parliament, as well as statements and deliberations by government officials, pro-Kremlin ideologists and members of the presidential team, who expound on the topic of what the government wants, are significant in analyzing the current political process and simulating the future. They come up with phrases like 'sovereign democracy,' 'managed democracy,' 'a doubling of GDP,' 'construction of an efficient state' and 'national projects.' In spite of their bombastic nature, they are not all signs of an over-exuberant existence of Putin or his associates but, rather, a "binder solution" essential for the structure of the state.

Politicians, the experts servicing the government and the United Russia Party have produced a mass of statements, formulations and documents on the issue of sovereign democracy of late. Central among them is a speech that Vladislav Surkov, a senior Kremlin aide, made on February 7, 2006 to students of United Russia's Center for Party Personnel Training, and his manifesto-like article titled *The Nationalization of the Future*. The time and place of the publication (in November 2006 on the eve of United Russia's congress) prove that the concept should be viewed as an attempt to formulate Putin's discourse in the form of a textual/contextual political quintessence of the current era, not as a mere ideological party platform.

The very fact that the government and the organizations beating around it have rolled up their sleeves to produce an ide-

ology is without a doubt a strictly encouraging sign. The efforts to formulate an ideological project of this sort may testify to the party's willingness to modernize Russia on the basis of innovative technologies or to the necessity of reuniting and remotivating the entire political elite or because the plain truth is that there is no place to retreat to on the eve of the crucial 2008 presidential election.

Yet for understanding the prospects for Russia's statehood and state ideology it is important to clear out the social and functional status of the texts and concepts the authorities are generating now. Are they part of a new Russian idea or a new modernization strategy? Or are they a PR project, a statement of mission by the governmental cartel that some people have ironically called ZAO Rossiya (the Closed Joint Stock Company Russia) lately? Or might it be that the transition at the start of the decade to a corporate state, which jettisoned its "superfluous" social, geopolitical, ideological and CIS-related functions, has made conceptual differences between national ideas, corporate missions and post-modernist PR projects, generated through manipulations with national archetypes, insignificant?

As a concept, slogan, national idea, or ideological point of reference, 'sovereign democracy' represents a comprehensive multi-tier political and ideological project that calls for an equally multi-tier interpretation. Its non-linear nature implies that, given certain circumstances, this project will awaken to an independent life regardless of the contents its authors wanted to impart to it.

At this moment, the sovereign democracy project makes it possible to:

- Provide grounds for new legitimacy of the party in power;
- Make the party's core agencies efficiently competitive as regards other elitist groupings;
- Make a new social contract between the political regime and the nation;
- Put the initiative on ideology-making into the party's hands;
- Verbalize Putin's course, to which Russia's next president and new political elite must keep their allegiance;

- Position United Russia as the core of the party's power-wielding camp;
- Create a main message in United Russia's election campaign in the fall 2007 parliamentary election;
- Become a mobilizing and consolidating factor in the face of new challenges and threats in foreign and domestic policy likewise;
- Animate the image of Russia as a "besieged fortress" so as to consolidate the electorate in a situation critical for the power-wielding camp (like the presidential election at the beginning of 2008);
- Expand the field for political maneuvering for the power-wielding camp in the context of the 2008 presidential election;
- Provide ideological and operative grounds for narrowing the scope of public politics;
- Counteract the scenarios of a 'birch revolution' in Russia and sanction fighting with 'birch revolutionaries.'

THREE EPICENTERS OF RUSSIAN THOUGHT

It is quite important to identify the coordinates of sovereign democracy on the map of Russia's intellectual culture.

It is believed that Russian social philosophy and social-political thought in the period from the early 19th century to the present day can be classified, despite its diversity, as a division between Westernizers and Slavophiles. The Westernizers (liberals and revolutionary democrats) insist on modernization through 'Westernization.' Landmark figures among them included Chaadayev, Herzen, Belinsky, Granovsky, Kavelin, Struve and Sakharov. Westernizers believe that the Western Christian civilization demonstrates a universal model of development. Slavophiles (in the broad sense of the word) espouse the theory of a model wherein modernization is not pinned to Westernization. Given the closeness in the theories of various Slavophile groups, like *pochvenniki* (traditionalists) and 'Eurasians,' the most important personalities in this school of thought are Khomyakov, Gogol, Dostoyevsky, Danilevsky, Leontyev, Nikolai Trubetskoi, Savitsky, Ilyin, and Solzhenitsyn.

Yet Russian social and political thinking offers a much greater diversity than the divisions between Westernizers and Slavophiles. In fact, one can discern in it three, not just two, conceptual epicenters. Standing apart from both trends mentioned above are representatives of the conservative/preservationist trend who create various theories of “official *narodnost* [national spirit].” Preservationist conservatism seeks to bolster the existing social relationships and state structure. The preservationists include Karamzin, Speransky, Uvarov, Pogodin, Tyutchev, Katkov, Pobedonostsev, Tikhomirov and Solonevich.

This three-epicenter matrix reproduces itself perfectly well in the social and political reality of contemporary Russia – in political philosophy, ideological arguments, polemics in the mass media, informational wars and, occasionally, even in the real political process. Quite naturally, each ideological epicenter allows for variations of ideas and differences on one or another position, but the basic ideological and ontological outlooks within each of these ideological communities are quite homogeneous.

The Liberal (Westernized) epicenter. Politicians and political projects: Mikhail Kasyanov, Irina Khakamada, Anatoly Chubais, Valeria Novodvorskaya, Boris Nemtsov, Garri Kasparov, the Union of Right Forces (SPS), Yabloko, the Other Russia.

Mass media: *Novaya Gazeta*, Ekho Moskvyy Radio, Polit.ru news portal, RTVi satellite channel.

Ideologists and publicists: Leonid Radzikhovskiy, Yulia Latynina, Alexei Venediktov, Viktor Shenderovich.

Basic values: discrete ontology, liberty, individualism, modernization through Westernization, market economic principles, acceptance of a strategy of Russia’s dependent development.

Conservative/revolutionary (Slavophile) epicenter. Politicians and political projects: Sergei Glazyev, Dmitry Rogozin, Natalya Narochnitskaya, Eduard Limonov, the Rodina party in the early periods of its history, the Communist Party of the Russian Federation (KPRF) (partly), the National Bolshevik Party (partly). The newly formed Spravedlivaya Rossiya (A Just Russia) party may develop along that line in the future too.

Mass media: newspapers *Zavtra* and *Limonka*, People's Radio, Internet portals Pravaya.ru and APN.ru (partly).

Ideologists and publicists: Alexander Prokhanov, Alexander Dugin, Mikhail Delyagin, Vitaly Averyanov and authors of the Russian Doctrine project, Mikhail Remizov, Konstantin Krylov.

Basic values: development, blending of traditions and innovation, modernization without Westernization, organic principles of society construction, patriotism, a weighty social element in government policies in many cases.

Conservative/preservationist epicenter. Politicians and political projects: Boris Gryzlov, Sergei Ivanov, Oleg Morozov, Valentina Matviyenko, Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, the United Russia Party, the Liberal Democratic Party of Russia (LDPR), the youth movement Nashi.

Mass media: ORT television, the state-run RTR broadcasting company, *Ekspert* and *Russky Zhurnal* magazines.

Ideologists and publicists: intellectuals concentrating around the Efficient Policies Foundation, Gleb Pavlovskiy, Sergei Markov, Valery Fadeyev, Alexei Chadayev, Mikhail Leontyev, Vitaly Tretyakov, Vyacheslav Nikonov, Andranik Migranian and some others. Analysts traditionally say that Vladislav Surkov, the chief ideologist of the "sovereign democracy" project, falls into this category too.

Basic values: order, stability, steadiness and a controllable political system, continuity of power, state paternalism, restrictions on or absence of public politics, patriotism.

Historically, the Slavophiles and supporters of the conservative/revolutionary trend have had the most unstable and disadvantageous position. In the 1840s, they clearly fell out of the format of the "official *narodnost'*" doctrine. Tsar Nicholas I hated them, and the theological works of Alexei Khomyakov (and note that they contained apologetics of Orthodoxy) were banned in the Russian Empire and were printed abroad in French. As regards today's political, information and intellectual space of Russia, the Slavophiles often look like losers and outcasts. They cannot count on support from the state, from oligarchic businesses or from Western funds.

The Westernizers can rely on financial, organizational, moral and political support from Europe and the U.S. It was not only Alexander Herzen, the publisher of the émigré *Kolokol* magazine in the past, but also hundreds of non-governmental institutions and foundations that built “democracy and civic society” in Russia in the 1990s and 2000s with a great deal of commercial success.

The preservationists can always hope for getting ‘a state contract’ and support from administrative resources. Their group includes well-calculating conformists, enlightened loyalists, or simply committed people who honestly believe that any departure from the “the strategic guidelines” opens the road to turmoil, instability, chaos or ‘orange revolutions.’

CONSERVATIVE REVOLUTION

AS A PRESERVATIONIST TECHNOLOGY

An analysis of Vladislav Surkov’s policy document called *The Nationalization of the Future* reveals that the author borrowed the bulk of his ideas from the conservative/revolutionary ideology and political philosophy.

Surkov shows that he works in the conservative/revolutionary conceptual field by breaking with the intellectuals, for whom the sun rises in the West, and with the decadents, who claim that Russia has become overstrained under the burden of its imperial mission and is now bowing out of history; by dissociating himself with isolationism and autarchy; by declaring the “conserving of the people” as a goal and tool of rejuvenation; by saying that Europe need not be idealized, and by decrying so-called “progress.”

The four priorities of sovereign democracy keep up the same spirit and apparently go down to Ivan Ilyin and “solidarity concepts.” They are civic solidarity as a force preventing social and military conflicts; the creative class as society’s leading stratum replenished in the course of a free competition of citizens and envisioning innovative approaches and synergies on the part of creative groups of people; culture as an organism of notion-building and ideological influences and education and science as

sources of competitiveness making the economy of knowledge an important priority.

Surkov's text contains tentative covert polemics with Anatoly Chubais's liberal thesis about a "liberal empire" and even with Putin's thesis about an "energy superpower." The author speaks with superlative overtones about a "puissant energy power" that will rise "out of a struggle for possession of high technology and not out of an overgrowth of the energy sector."

The author's former pro-Western liberal convictions show through the Eurocentric thesis about Europe as the main generator of modernization processes. Also, he describes Russia as "a most influential European nation." The same spirit glimmers behind his interpretation of Russia's historic credo – "to avert a falling out of Europe and to abide by the West is an important element in constructing a new Russia."

A discussion in absentia with the leading forces of the Georgian and Ukrainian 'colored revolutions' surfaces only once, and yet everything suggests that this is the main point of reference on which the metaphysical and technological legitimacy of the whole concept of sovereignty hinges. "The multiplication of entertaining 'revolutions' and democracies governed by external forces, which seems artificial, is a natural fact precisely in such countries," Surkov writes. This is to say, the countries that do not set themselves the goal of attaining genuine sovereignty and hence exist under the patronage of other states. He defines Russia as "non-Ukraine" and "non-Georgia." "Long-lasting foreign rule is inconceivable here."

Given the fact that Surkov's conservative/revolutionary ideas are largely addressed to the United Russia Party, whose ideology, rhetoric and key functionaries' image put it into the conservative/preservationist ideological camp, a question comes up about how big the mobilization potential of that ideology really is.

It was not the brightness of life or any kind of ideological mutation that prompted the authorities to assimilate the parlance of the conservative/revolutionary milieu. The real reason was the exhaustion of the government's own conceptual reservoirs. Values

like order, stability, and keeping the balance delivered the goods at the start of Putin's presidency, but in the past few years the power-wielding camp has run out of resources. The anti-'orange' rhetoric as a factor for the legitimacy of the regime is losing its vigor right in front of our eyes, while the regime's mobilization demands have grown, especially in the light of the parliamentary election in fall 2007 and the presidential election in 2008.

That is why the matching of the political, organizational and media capabilities of the conservative/preservationist camp and conservative/revolutionary values with some semblances of liberal rhetoric emerges as the most adequate response to the challenges of time from the viewpoint of political and ideological marketing and the survival of Putin's political regime.

Nonetheless, it is worth noting that the conservative/revolutionary discourse and notions remain alien to the ideologists of sovereign democracy, its operators and its consumers.

THE WRITER SURKOV

Quite remarkably, Vladislav Surkov, the author of the 'sovereign democracy' manifesto, a document consisting of conservative/revolutionary concepts, is a person whose outlooks and objectives in his previous life (the one before he took to ideology making) could be identified as liberal. His professional activity as deputy chief of the presidential administration developed in the conservative/preservationist vein, and his musical and poetic oeuvre draws on post-modernist and decadent-Gothic learnedness.

Many of the people who map out the political, notional, information and ideological contours of today's Russia and the incumbent political regime rose up as professionals in corporate PR and political technologies. Their professional mentality is specific due to their faith in the omnipotence of humanitarian technologies. This is where Surkov comes from. It has not been ruled out that this background had an impact on the pragmatism and feasibility of the 'sovereign democracy' concept he codified.

In terms of style and semantics, Surkov's concept bears striking resemblance to the songs of the Russian pop group Lyube, with

their down-to-earth patriotism. Incidentally, the group's vocalist Nikolai Rastorguyev is an advisor to Putin on cultural affairs. On the one hand, Lyube's songs carry a claim containing something "genuine, personally experienced and painful." They tell us about a battalion commander "who never hid his heart behind the boys' backs," the rustle of the birch trees that spellbinds the Russians, the simple, robust "guys from our courtyard" and many other things that sound like revelations in an era of collapsing spiritual values and showbiz PR. However, Lyube's success came from clever marketing, studying the demands of the target audience and a calculated pursuit of the fashion for "genuineness."

WHAT SOVEREIGN DEMOCRACY IS MADE OF

Russian political and expert communities are split on the issue of sovereign democracy. Liberally-minded politicians — Dmitry Medvedev, Mikhail Gorbachev, Mikhail Kasyanov — had a lukewarm reception to the concept. Some of them believed that the very phrase was an oxymoron sounding like 'hot snow' [the title of a novel about the battle of Stalingrad by Soviet writer Yuri Bondarev — Ed.]. Others, including Putin, said that 'sovereign' and 'democracy' are notions standing for two different phenomena, with 'sovereign' denoting a country's position in the outside world and 'democracy' being a method of organizing society and the state. That is why the formula is awkward even if the idea behind it is correct, they said. Some ideologists, including Alexander Dugin, have proposed that the power-wielding camp augment sovereign democracy with the concept of 'commissar dictatorship' evolved by the German conservative philosopher and lawyer Carl Schmitt. "We're heading for a dictatorship, but don't get frustrated [...]. It'll meet the interest of the entire people, the nation, and the interest of Russia instead of the interest of narrow oligarchic groups or even classes."

It seems, however, that the assessment of sovereign democracy as a mechanical merging of two antiliberal concepts — a collective democracy model in the style of Jean-Jacque Rousseau and

Hans Morgenthau's realistic international policy model – is the most precise one.

The phrase 'sovereign democracy' came into use long before Surkov. During the Cold War, it meant a democratic state independent of the Soviet Union and the Communist camp and having an appropriate political regime. In today's world, it is broadly used in Taiwan where it provides an explanation for the island's independence from China and juxtaposes the democratic principles of the regime in Taipei to the regime in Beijing.

Sovereign democracy has a structure, in which the accent alternates between sovereignty and democracy depending on the circumstances. The current situation in Russia as interpreted by Surkov necessitates an accent on the problem of sovereignty and Russia's international substantial, thus proving that the existing top list of threats and challenges differs from the one of the beginning of the decade.

'Sovereign democracy' is related to 'managed democracy.' But the latter emphasized Russia's domestic problems in the early years of Putin's presidency. It legitimized the young political regime and fixed the power-wielding camp's exclusive status regarding the heritage of the Yeltsin era marked by a collapse of the state, the rule of oligarchs, chaos and total de-modernization. Sovereign democracy highlights international problems in the first place. These are global competition, the struggle for energy resources, attempts by some countries to restrict the sovereignty of other countries, 'colored revolutions,' etc. But the goal is roughly the same – to furnish the power-wielding camp with grounds for claiming the exclusive right to the upkeep of its preponderant status and to legitimize itself in the eyes of the nation and the world community.

'Sovereign democracy' carries two simultaneous messages to Russian society. The first message says that we are a party wielding state power and a sovereign elite, and the sources of our legitimacy are found in Russia, not in the West, like it was during the 'guided democracy' of the Yeltsin era. Second, being a power-wielding force we are the guarantors of Russia's sovereignty and survival in the context of globalization and other external super-threats.

Constructive elements of the 'sovereign democracy' concept make it similar to the well-known Orthodoxy-Autocracy-Narodnost [national character] triad stipulated by Count Sergei Uvarov [Russia's education minister in the 1830s-1840s – Ed]. Autocracy might probably serve as a prototype of Surkov's sovereignty while *narodnost* as a prototype of democracy. The basic difference between 'sovereign democracy' and 'official *narodnost*' is the absence of a spiritual benchmark of some kind, the one that Orthodoxy provided in Uvarov's formula. Was it dropped owing to pragmatism, political correctness or equidistant positioning of religious denominations?

The evidence shows that political correctness or unwillingness to give a religious coloring to politics was the least likely reason. The mentality of the creators of 'sovereign democracy' does not leave room for any transcendence and that is why the very concept breathes with utilitarianism, pragmatism and technicality.

Since 'sovereign democracy' is understood in this concept as a collective phenomenon ruling out the rise of democratic procedures to the level of institutions, democracy in it may invoke comparison with the concept of *sobornost* [togetherness] offered by Alexei Khomyakov. The comparison looks reasonable at first glance since, according to Khomyakov, the Sobor – a council or a decision-making assembly representing all strata of society – reflects the idea of a gathering, not necessarily convened in a single place as such assemblies can function without a formal binding, and means, in fact, unity in a magnitude of diversities. For the Church, the principle of *sobornost* dictates that neither the Patriarch, nor the clergy nor Ecumenical Councils are the holders of truth. The only such holder is the Church as a whole, the Church that is identified as a transcendent reality. "The Church is not a multitude of persons taken separately in their individuality but, rather, a unity of God's Grace that exists in innumerable sensible creatures submitting themselves to it." In other words, *sobornost* is an ontological condition and not a mechanical mass of people or a technology governing them. Democracy in Surkov's concept has only a superficial resemblance of *sobornost*. It has a

similar form and leaves out the formal institutions and norms of law as chief regulators of relationships in society. The problem is that *sobornost* compensates for this absence with the aid of heavenly Grace, a transcendent factor, while the concept of 'sovereign democracy' does not have it, replacing it by interest and rationality. That is why it would be appropriate to view 'sovereign democracy' as technology without ontology.

MOBILIZATION VERSUS ENTROPY

The emergence of the 'sovereign democracy' concept signifies a big step forward compared with the Yeltsin era or the beginning of Putin's presidency.

All facts suggest that any text on 'sovereign democracy' would have been labeled as fascist, chauvinistic, anti-democratic or anti-Western during Yeltsin's term and its author would have been pushed out of the effective information space. Now such texts have become mainstream and their authors are operators of the 'official *narodnost*.'

The concept of 'sovereign democracy' has mobilization objectives. It does not aim to explain being, it aims to transform the social and political reality. That is why, if the power-wielding camp decides to change along with rhetoric the actual ideology (conservative/revolutionary instead of conservative/preservationist) and to replace the actual priorities of the country's development (innovative modernization instead of stability), there will be grounds to claim then that 'sovereign democracy' has broken out of the framework of utilitarian political technologies and has been fleshed out with real content. Otherwise this ideological program will remain nothing more than beautiful words devoid of both ontological veritableness and mobilization potential.