The End of Sovereign Democracy in Russia:

What was it, why did it fail, what comes next and what should the United States think of this?

Dr. Ray Sontag

Raymond Sontag received his doctorate in politics from the University of Oxford in 2011. He previously served as the program officer for the National Democratic Institute's political party program in Moscow. Ray has published articles in The American Interest and is a former research scholar at the Kennan Institute.
Abstract

Vladimir Putin’s time in charge of Russia has been marked by a drive to eliminate competition for real power. At the same time, it also saw a campaign to include elements of democracy while protecting its rulers from challenges to their supremacy. Under this system, multiple parties loyal to the Kremlin competed for seats in parliament and between 2008 and 2012 Putin, to some extent at least, shared power with Dmitry Medvedev, his loyal protégé. This model, dubbed “sovereign democracy”, seemed to serve Putin well for most of past thirteen years. It allowed for the inclusion of a range of interests and ideologies in parliament and government, created at least the impression that there were alternative parties from which to choose and allowed those in power to point to a plan for gradual liberalization. Perhaps most importantly, sovereign democracy allowed Putin to maintain the popular idea that he, and he alone, could hold Russia’s fractious society together, stand over its political system and serve as the arbiter of social and elite conflicts. In 2011, though, this model was abandoned for one that presents no alternatives or path to liberalization: Putin is now the only figure of note, United Russia is the only party that can win elections and there is no apparent plan to change this. It is tempting to dismiss sovereign democracy as window dressing and see its passing as having no real impact on what is a largely authoritarian regime. The emergence of this narrower politics makes Russia more prone to domestic conflicts, less able to deal with emerging demands from society and its leaders more likely to appeal to anti-Americanism. While the United States has sought to promote genuine liberal democracy in Russia, recent changes in politics there raises the question of whether sovereign democracy was not a better state of affairs than it may have appeared.

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Vladimir Putin has sought to maintain a political system that included elements of pluralism and competition, but that protected him and his team from real competition for power. Since 2000 multiple parties that represent a range of ideologies, but that remain subservient to the Kremlin, have competed for seats in legislatures. From 2008 to 2012 Putin shared at least some power with his chosen successor and loyal protégé, then President Dmitry Medvedev. This system, while falling well short of any real definition of democracy, allowed for a range of ideologies and interests to be represented in government, the state to be more responsive to society and for the Putin team to point to path for gradual liberalization. While it is unclear whether they ever intended to pursue this liberalization, the existence of a plan for it lent important credibility to the regime. This system also allowed Putin to be something of a constitutional monarch. He could claim to stand above the political fray and serve as the uniter and arbiter of Russia’s factions society and elites. Along with Putin’s personal popularity and a good dose of repression, this system of managed democracy or “sovereign democracy”, as former Putin aide Vladislav Surkov dubbed it, has provided for a period of prolonged stability in Russian politics. This stability has seen Putin rule unchallenged, allowing him to implement his policies and preside over a period of relative prosperity.

Over the past two years, though, Putin has been dismantling sovereign democracy and replacing it with an approach to politics that allows for even less competition and diversity in government. In 2011 he allowed United Russia to increase its share of seats in parliament through wide-spread falsification, despite the party’s significantly decreased popularity. In the same year, Putin also announced that Medvedev’s time as president was ending and that he, Putin, would return to the presidency for third term. The immediate result of Putin’s decisions to make himself the only figure of significance in Russian politics and to make United Russia’s dominance permanent was the anti-government protests of 2011-12. The protest movement has foundered and Putin is still firmly in power, but these decisions have given his regime less flexibility when dealing with popular discontent and more prone to conflict with Russia’s urban, more affluent population. They have also deprived Putin of his image of Russia’s great uniter. After the fractious 1990s, this image was key to his rise to power and his ability to wield it uncontested. In its absence, it is likely that his popularity will continue to fall and his ability to rule effectively will diminish. According to the Levada polling agency, from 2008 to 2012 the proportion of Russian who approved of Putin fell from 88 percent to 63 percent. While the decline in his popularity seems to have been arrested in recent months, according to an April 2013 poll only 22 percent of Russians want Putin reelected in 2018 when his current term ends.

For the United States, which has sought to promote democracy in Russia and seen Putin largely as an impediment to this, it may be tempting to welcome his diminished popularity and

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2 http://www.ej.ru/?a=note&id=12939#

3 http://www.vedomosti.ru/politics/news/11024631/hvatit_putina#ixzz2Q8VQmVfa
the weakening of his system for managing politics. But this weakness is likely to make cooperation between Russia and the United States more difficult while not yielding a more democratic Russia. Anti-Americanism has always featured in Putin’s rhetoric, but in confronting the protest movement, he has suggested it roots lie in the West, greatly decreasing the likelihood that he will be willing to cooperate or compromise with the United States. If Putin’s popularity and ability to govern effectively do continue to deteriorate, he will continue to seek to bolster his image as a strong leader, making cooperation and compromise even less likely. And as Russia’s history, and especially its history in the aftermath of the Soviet Union show, the weakening of the authoritarian center is unlikely to produce more democracy. Therefore, as the quasi-pluralism of sovereign democracy is replaced by a less inclusive and more conflict-prone form of politics, the United States should perhaps reassess what it sees as the necessary conditions for democracy in Russia.

Vladislav Surkov offered the term “sovereign democracy” in a 2006 speech as an alternative description of Russia’s political system to “managed democracy.” The idea behind sovereign democracy was that it allowed Russia to develop as an open, democratic, modern state while protecting itself from illegitimate interference in its affairs. “We’re building an open society, while not forgetting that we are free,” Surkov said in the speech. “We want to be an open nation among other open nations and cooperate with them on the basis of fair rules and not be managed from abroad.”

Shortly before being dismissed from government in May 2013, Surkov once again touched on sovereign democracy’s role in allowing Russia to meet the challenge of opening to the world and democratizing in the post-Soviet era. “I don’t think this is very important for English democracy,” He told students at the London School of Economics. “But in a country [Russia] that some thirty years ago was totally closed and understood sovereignty to mean isolation, it was important to explain that a different sovereignty is possible, that one can retain one’s identity in a different way.”

Surkov’s characterizations of the political system fit nicely with one of the major themes of Putin’s time in power: protecting Russia and its interests from foreign interference. But in practice sovereign democracy was not so much about protecting Russia as a country as it was protecting the Russian state, or more precisely protecting those who were in power. Vasily Yakemenko, the leader of the Kremlin-created youth movement “Nashi,” described it in 2005 more succinctly (and earlier) than Surkov did: “…we advocate sovereign democracy, where the freedoms of people and the freedoms of the state are necessary and equal.”

While sovereign democracy’s theorists presented at as a negative right of the Russia state – it was free from outside interference – in its practical application it became a positive right for

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those in power: They were free to limit access to government and competition for power in ways that would be unacceptable in liberal democracies.

The specific strategy for allowing for some democracy while protecting the state was the maintenance of a political party system that was loyal to the Kremlin. These so-called system parties are nominally independent and free to compete for power, but they cooperate closely with the Presidential Administration and avoid direct challenges to Putin. They cover the major portions of Russia’s ideological spectrum and have their own bases of support in society. Chief among them is United Russia, whose ideology could be described as centrist and obsequiously pro-Putin. In addition there is more social-democratically oriented Just Russia, the Communist Party and the part-nationalist movement/part-comedy act of Vladimir Zhirinovsky’s Liberal Democratic Party. Missing from this constellation is a pro-market, pro-democracy party that could draw support from Russia’s more affluent urban population. Since the (less-than-loyal-to-Putin) Yabloko and Union of Right Forces parties failed to win seats in parliament in 2003, this part of the spectrum has gone unrepresented in the Duma or by system parties. The Presidential Administration attempted to change this in 2008 with the creation of the Just Cause party, but this project fell apart before it started.7

While those who wanted liberalization and a better business climate may have lacked a party, in an important sense they gained a president in 2008 in Dmitry Medvedev. Rather than alter the constitution after two terms in power to give himself a third consecutive term, Putin selected Medvedev as his successor as president. Putin then went to serve as prime minister, creating the so-called ruling tandem of himself and Medvedev. Just as the “system parties” give Russians at least the impression of a range of choices at election time, “tandemocracy”8 gave the impression of multiple ideologies being represented in government. Over his four years in office, Medvedev devoted considerable attention to reforms, albeit very limited ones, meant to improve the quality of Russia’s democracy,9 reduce human rights abuses by the criminal justice system10 and encourage the development of a high-tech, innovative economy.11 Medvedev’s presidency also saw the emergence of something of a debate between some of his allies who advocated more far reaching democratization and those who argued for the status-quo.12

Many have dismissed this party-system and the Medvedev presidency as nothing more than window dressing for Putin’s autocratic ambitions, which consist exclusively of self-enrichment and holding onto power. Indeed, sovereign democracy has served as a cover for

8 http://www.kommersant.ru/doc/864737
much corruption and abuse of power.\textsuperscript{13} Its role, though, in allowing multiple interests and ideologies a place in government, albeit a limited one,, cannot be dismissed. Sovereign democracy may not have been real democracy, but the elements of democracy it brought to Russia’s political system contributed to its relative stability under Putin.

The chief piece of evidence for this is the protest movement that emerged in response to United Russia increased its share of seats in the Duma in the 2011 elections despite its popularity falling and Putin deciding to return to the presidency. In the year leading up to the 2011 elections, United Russia’s likely share of the vote according to polls dropped dramatically\textsuperscript{14} and the party itself seemed prepared to accept a reduced number of seats in the new Duma.\textsuperscript{15} Instead, amid well documented and widespread falsifications in its favor, United Russia increased its number of seats from 304 to 315.\textsuperscript{16} Had Putin and his team simply allowed United Russia to lose seats to the other system parties, or had he elected to retain the tandem arrangement for another six years, it is hard to imagine there would have been any protests.

It is hard to know why exactly Putin opted for the course he did when the logic of the system of sovereign democracy that he had cultivated dictated otherwise. Perhaps United Russia has grown too powerful in its own right for even Putin to tell its leaders and members that they would have to accept fewer seats in parliament. In any event, it appears that Putin could not tolerate even a minimum of competition and pluralism.

So what are the implications for the United States of this shift to a narrower, more confrontational approach to politics from Russia’s leadership? The most immediate implication has been an increase in anti-Western, and especially anti-American, rhetoric and propaganda from Russia’s leaders. Putin’s reelection campaign relied on a heavy dose of invective against foreign forces seeking to undermine Russia\textsuperscript{17} and Russian state television has repeatedly suggested that the protest movement is part of a plot hatched in the United States and United Kingdom.\textsuperscript{18} This increase in officially expressed suspicion toward the United States is likely to make what is already a difficult relationship harder.

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\textsuperscript{17} Ria.ru, “Vystuplenie Vladimira Putina na mitinge v Luzhnikah” http://ria.ru/vybor2012_putin/20120223/572995366.html; accessed 6/14/13
\textsuperscript{18} Video: Special’nyi korrespondent: ”Provokatory 3” http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K4ryu-MHs6s; accessed 6/14/13
But even if the US-Russian relationship suffers in the short-term, it is worth asking if the more robust opposition movement to Putin that has emerged from sovereign democracy’s failure does not herald a step toward real democracy. It is certainly possible the Putin’s popularity will continue to wane and with it his ability to rule unchallenged. And when this erosion of power reaches a critical point, Putin and his team could be forced to accept fairer and more competitive elections, leading to a more democratic system. This, however, is unlikely. Russia’s history, and its recent history in particular, though, suggests that a weakening of the center may not produce democracy. Indeed, Putin’s rise to power and the popular acceptance of his authoritarianism are largely the result of Russia’s experience with the weakness of the center and intense political competition of the 1990s. Therefore, the United States should not equate the weakening or collapse of the Putin regime with the emergence of greater democracy in Russia.

In practice, of course, the United States can have very little impact on the course of domestic Russian politics. Washington may have had some ability to shape Russia’s political system in the 1990s when Moscow was dependent on Western loans and enthusiasm for Western democracy was higher. With Russia able to support itself through oil and gas sales and skepticism toward the West high, American influence over Russian domestic politics is minimal. To the extent that the United States can shape Russian politics, though, it should accept that Russia’s path to greater democracy may run though a state that is more centralized than Americans typically see as compatible with democracy. Sovereign democracy may not have been the right answer, but the problem that Surkov and others identified, how Russia retains a strong central state while becoming more liberal, was and is probably the right problem to address. As the journalists and political scientists Vitaly Tretyakov wrote in a 2008 article on the problem of democratizing Russia “…we must find a sort of golden ration for Russia’s political system, the optimal ration of possible maximum democracy with the unavoidably necessary minimum of authoritarianism…”19

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