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Diplomacy and Russia's de-democratisation

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LUKE MARCH, JUL 17 2009

Russia is no democracy, nor will it become one anytime soon. This view is now mainstream in Europe and the US – unbridled optimism about Russia's domestic transformation in the 1990s is now replaced by excessive pessimism. Most analysts are now concerned far less with Russia's domestic development, apart from lengthy (and by their nature speculative) dissections of the so-called 'tandemocracy' between President Dmitri Medvedev and Prime Minister Vladimir Putin. The concern of most is now how to deal with the external power projection of an apparently consolidated authoritarian state. Democracy, if it matters at all for the calculations either of Russia's authorities or external observers, is just a footnote. So the pertinent question for outsiders is not now 'what kind of state is Russia', but 'how do we deal with Russian foreign policy?'

Accordingly, does Russian democracy and the nature of its regime still matter at all? There are two main reasons why it does. First, the nature of the regime is actually still mutable and disputable; second, the nature of this regime impacts both on Russia's policy towards the outside world and our reciprocal policy towards it.

According to some of the most popular characterizations of the Russian state, the picture is simple. This is an authoritarian, even totalitarian state which is largely the personal fiefdom of former President Putin, who still governs informally through a huge coterie of security services personnel and corrupt big business. This is a Russia that has rolled back even the minimal democratic freedoms of the 1990s through consistent centralizing pressure, including crackdowns on opposition demonstrations, the abolition of regional elections, increasingly catch-all 'anti-extremism' legislation, and a new one-party system dominated by the pro-presidential 'United Russia' party.[1] This is a Russia which promotes an anti-Western nationalism through state-run media, which promotes the anti-Western collectivism of the Russian Orthodox Church, and selectively rehabilitates Stalin (most recently through an Orwellian commission to prevent the 'falsification of history'). In short, if this is not quite a 'USSR-lite' it evokes the reactionary Tsarist mantra of 'Orthodoxy, Autocracy and Nationality'.[2] For some, the situation is simpler still - this is a fascist, criminalized state that is a danger even to its own citizens (in particular those critical of the authorities like murdered journalist Anna Politovskaya).[3]

This clear picture has been (deliberately) muddled by a sustained Kremlin counter-offensive, which insists on the nationally specific features of democracy *à la Russe* and Russia's right not simply to import Western models but to democratise in a manner of its own choosing. This approach, which crystallised as 'sovereign democracy' in 2005 (although the term provoked significant controversy and is now less favoured) argues that Russia is democratic because its people chose to divest themselves of communist rule, because of its democratic constitution and Russia's 'sovereignty' from foreign domination. It was accompanied by a vehement critique of Western 'double standards' (democratisation allegedly involving the subjugation of electorates to Euro-Atlantic self-interest). 'Sovereign democracy' is easy to criticise: it is transparently a self-interested attempt to insulate Russia against 'coloured revolutions' (portrayed as US-sponsored 'revolutions-for-export' rather than domestic popular mobilization) and simply asserts rather than demonstrates Russian democratic achievements. Its characterisation of 'democracy' as popular sovereignty is deeply flawed, since it ignores Aristotle's principle that mere majority rule is tyranny because it does not permit any change of ruler. It is precisely this inability 'to throw the rascals out' (due partly to the absence of any convincing opposition, but more to the absence of equitable opportunities to oppose) that is the most evident flaw of Russian democracy, and it is precisely this factor that means that Russian state must be regarded as authoritarian even though its current leaders are very popular. As Robert Amsterdam rightly observes, Russia is

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'sovereign, perhaps, but democratic? Not even close'.[4]

Nevertheless, Russian arguments against Western double-standards are far from facile. For instance, the influential US-based think-tank Freedom House's characterisation of Russia as 'not free' (first made in 2005), would be more credible if its methodology subjected Western states to similar scrutiny. The UK government has been particularly culpable of hypocrisy. For instance, its 2006 demand that Russia change its constitution in order to facilitate the extradition of the murder suspect Andrei Lugovoi is simply laughable coming from a country which has no codified constitution, and where the governing party has latterly contemplated serious constitutional reform only as it faces electoral defeat.

The Russian domestic picture is in fact muddled. New President Medvedev has certainly instituted a dramatic change in political style. Constitutionalism and democracy are praised, radical nationalism is denounced, and the vehement anti-Western tone in domestic and foreign policy has been weakened. More significantly, liberalism has been (partially) rehabilitated. Medvedev has appointed a liberal governor and given an interview to the liberal daily *Novaya gazeta*. Liberals in a think-tank patronised by Medvedev have even attacked the influence of Putin's powerful 'ideology chief' Vladislav Surkov and called for democratisation as an imperative to avoid economic collapse.[5]

The substantive significance of these (largely rhetorical) changes is debatable, especially since Medvedev's initiatives are far from unambiguously liberal (viz. the new history commission noted above). While Medvedev is more than simply Putin's 'Mini-Me' as he was earlier portrayed, the influence of his patron still looms large, and his autonomy is clearly circumscribed.[6] It is also unclear how much of Russia's new pragmatic tone is conditioned by its sobering economic outlook, and how much a projected return to economic growth will provoke a return to assertive or even aggressive policies. What has become apparent is that the political system is (if only slightly) more pluralistic and adaptable than many had previously characterised, and that political change can come from within. Indeed, if one report is to be believed, most of the upcoming Russian elite are unhappy with the excessive centralism of the political system.[7]

The mutability and adaptability of the Russian political system also affects its foreign policy. It has become commonplace to regard Russia as nakedly 'assertive', 'aggressive', even 'imperialist', when only the former characterization is consistently true (let's not forget that Russia's 'invasion' of Georgia in 2008, however heavy-handed, was precipitated by Mikheil Saakashvili's impetuous response to Russian provocation). Certainly 'sovereign democracy' implies an existential challenge to Western liberal norms, but the domestic furore over this term indicates that Russia has not consistently sought to undermine Western values, except where they directly affect its own interests. Indeed, Russia still insists it is a 'European' not Eurasian country, and has deep concerns about uniting with rivals like China in any prospective 'Authoritarian International'. Meddlesome behaviour in near neighbours notwithstanding, Russia is a status-quo rather than expansionist power. Even its assertiveness can be traced, in part, to the failures of Western policy in the region, such as the lack of adequate incentives for reform in the European Neighbourhood Policy, and the controversies of NATO expansion. NATO's expansion to Russia's borders militarises, and therefore potentially destabilises, what is profoundly a *political* problem: NATO is fundamentally inadequate to the task of creating functional democratic states.

Russia's current juncture, balanced between assertive Putinism and more reflective, 'liberal' Medvedevism, means that it is potentially responsive to Obama's call to 'reset' Russia-West relations. However, the precise degree to which Western approaches themselves need resetting is also controversial. Russian liberals have grown alarmed at what they see as a 'realist' US approach that concentrates above all on common strategic issues, downgrades criticisms of Russia's domestic democratisation, and thereby buttresses the positions of Russia's authoritarian authorities.[8] The so-called 'realists' deny that they are seeking simplistic trade-offs (for example by dropping European missile defence for greater co-operation over Iran) and argue that Russia's democratisation is best served first by détente in increasingly adversarial rhetoric.[9]

The liberal-realist debate quickly took stereotypical and vituperative forms and highlights the long-term problem of strictly delineating interests from values in policy towards Russia.[10] Although Obama's approach is evolving, it

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appears to recognise that neither approach will be effective in pure form: a hypocritical lecture on democratic values will counter-productively allow the Russian elite to reinforce its anti-Western fortress mentality in the aim of authoritarian consolidation, whereas an insistence on a limited number of common Russian-US interests risks giving Russia carte blanche in its so-called 'sphere of influence', immune from outside criticism (a prospect explicitly rejected by Washington). So even if it is theoretically muddled, the Obama administration appears to be following the best available policy.

Although Obama's approach recognizes that Western policies have lost any direct appeal within Russia, resetting relations depends not just on any intrinsic value to the West's proposals, but the Russian elite's domestic interests – indeed, reflex anti-Americanism has become a core component of their 'fortress mentality' in recent years. Greater Russian democratisation might actually better serve these elite interests. As long as Russia remains a state plagued by disruptive presidential 'succession' struggles, pervasive corruption and hyper-centralised policy-making, its own 'great power' aims will be challenged. Therefore, the question of Russia's democratisation will remain central. When and how Russia's key policy-makers might themselves realise this remains the imponderable.

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[1] For example, Robert Kagan, 'Stand Up to Putin', *Washington Post*, 15 September 2004. From <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A21853-2004Sep14.html>.

[2] Edward Lucas, *The New Cold War: How the Kremlin Menaces Both Russia and the West* (London: Bloomsbury, 2009).

[3] Pierre Hassner, 'Russia's Transition to Autocracy', *Journal of Democracy*, 19:2, 2008: 5-15.

[4] Robert Amsterdam, 'The imperial swagger of sovereign democracy', from <http://www.robertamsterdam.com>.

[5] For example, 'Evgeny Gontmakher: The government has to face the harsh reality', Institute of Contemporary Development, 11 March 2009, http://www.riocenter.ru/en/_news/analytics/5156.

[6] Andrew Wilson, 'Putin's Mini-Me', http://www.ecfr.eu/content/entry/commentary_wilson_on_medvedev, 20 December 2007.

[7] Georgy Ilichev 'Elitarny razdrai', *Novoe Vremya*, 2 March 2009, <http://newtimes.ru/articles/detail/2963>.

[8] Lev Gudkov, Igor Klyamkin, Georgy Satarov and Lilia Shevtsova, 'False Choices For Russia', 9 June 2009, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/06/08/AR2009060803496.html>.

[9] *The Right Direction for U.S. Policy toward Russia*, Report from The Commission on U.S. Policy toward Russia (Washington D.C.: 2009), <http://www.nixoncenter.org/RussiaReport09.pdf>.

[10] See for example the insightful arguments somewhat clouded by *ad hominem* invective in

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Anatol Lieven, 'Russia's Limousine Liberals', *The National Interest*, 10 June 2009, <http://www.nationalinterest.org/Article.aspx?id=21586>.

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