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Democracy in Russia since 1991

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Abstract

This research article critically examines the state of democracy in Russia, focusing on its dynamics and the challenges it faces. The study delves into the complex relationship between political governance and democratic principles in the context of Russia's evolving socio-political landscape. By employing a comprehensive analytical framework, the research identifies key factors that influence democratic development in Russia and explores the implications of these factors for the country's democratic consolidation.

Keywords: Russia, democracy, political governance, socio-political landscape, democratic development, democratic consolidation

Introduction

Democracy is the most widely accepted form of government in the modern world. Even the most authoritarian form of government claims to have some sort of democratic features in their state. The term democracy is derived from the Greek word *demokratia* which is coined from *demos* meaning people and *kratos* meaning rule. Thus, democracy implies 'rule by the people' which originated in ancient Greek city-states like 'Athens'. Since the time of ancient Greeks, both the theory and practice of Democracy have undergone profound changes. For instance, during ancient times, Democracy was practiced in the small city-states which were small enough to be suitable for direct democracy. Democracy in the modern period, particularly after the 18th century, has undergone a sweeping transformation and was practiced in nation-state or country which gives way to the representative democracy. So, we can say that democracy in modern day France or United States might not have appeared democratic at all from the perspective of a citizen of ancient Athens. In the same way, contemporary democrat could reasonably argue that there was no democracy in Athens because only few adults enjoyed citizenship in Athens where majority of the population were not given the citizen status. So, to conclude, Democracy is not a static phenomenon but an evolutionary and change-oriented process

Different countries have adopted distinct forms of democracy depending upon their history, culture, traditions, past experiences, etc. Some have opted for Parliamentary form of Democracy, whereas others have adopted the Presidential form of Democracy. In the same way, some states went for unitary form of government while others have incorporated the federal features of government. In this paper, I will be looking the nature of democracy in Russia since the adoption of 1993 constitution by the Russian government. While focusing on both the perspectives of Westerners (calling the Russian Democracy as 'Managed, Illiberal, Competitive-Authoritarianism) and Russians (claiming sovereign democracy with unique features), I will be analysing the challenges that prevents the consolidation of democracy in Russia from 1993 onwards.

The 1993 constitution described Russia as a democratic federation state with a republican form of government. The constitution of the Russian federation lays out the guidelines for the democracy and elections. Article 1 (chapter 1) of the Russian Federation constitution states that "Russia shall be democratic federal rule of law with the republican form of government". Article 3 (Chapter1) states that "the referendum and free election shall be the supreme direct manifestation of the power of the people." Similarly, Article 13 of the Russian constitution clearly mentions that there shall be no state sponsored or mandated ideology and the multiparty system shall exist.

Historically, the first elected assembly in Russia-the State Duma was established as early as

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1905 but it was based on limited franchise and had emphasised little on the issues of the general masses. The provisional government formed after the March Revolution of 1917 laid down the provisions of contestation of 50 political parties in a relative free election. But the Bolshevik revolution of 1917 resulted in the establishment of a single party under the slogan “All powers to Soviets”. Despite that the government before the disintegration of the Soviet Union is generally considered as antidemocratic, totalitarian and oppressing. However, the first democratic institutions and processes in Russian history were born during that period. The monarchy was erased, a constitution was implemented, and elections took place. The very nature of the Bolshevik revolution was democratic; the rule of the people by the people was established. The centralization continued during the Stalin’s period; the 1936 constitution mandated the elections to be conducted indirectly and secretly. Mikhail Gorbachev initiated the democratic process in 1987. However, his attempts were also limited and confined to the introduction of the multi-candidates in the Communist Party.

Russian Democracy as Managed Democracy

The idea of Russia as a “managed democracy” will be studied through the presidential successions. A managed democracy falls “somewhere between the poles of liberal (capitalist) democracies, characterized by the (Formally) free competition of organized political interests, democratic freedoms and the rule of law, and dictatorships, which violently suppress organized political opposition and political rights”^[1]. While Russia indeed organizes subsequent elections for both the State Duma, the presidency and regional and republican assemblies, it can hardly be called a consolidated democracy. So, if Russia is not a consolidated democracy, could it be described as an authoritarian state, or “competitive authoritarian”^[2]. Russia has a long history of authoritarianism, but while authoritarian leaders frequently change constitutions and the rules to make them fit their wishes and demands, Putin has not changed the constitution to strengthen his position^[3]. In contrast, he has used federal laws to enhance his position vis-a-vis regional governors^[4] while changing the electoral laws to create the change in the party system he wished for. Even though, Russia has not developed itself into a “full-blown” authoritarian state, as elections are frequently held, with relative freedoms for citizens, but strong advantages toward incumbent powers. In post-Soviet Russia, upto some degree, there were some democratic characteristics such as popular choice and accountability, while simultaneously there were “constraints on the free play of political forces and the contestation of policy options”^[5]. Russia indeed

falls between a liberal democracy and a dictatorship, as emphasized by Mandel (2005). Thus, under Vladimir Putin, Russia has developed itself into a “managed democracy”^[6]. On the one hand, there are democratic characteristics, while on the other hand the central administration has taken further control over elections, media, civil society and, in Russia's case, the regions^[7]. How has post-Soviet Russia developed itself into such a managed democracy? According to Mendras^[8], the adoption of the 1993 Constitution “marked the beginning of the end of constitutionalism”. Constitutionalism is here defined as a state with among others an independent constitutional court, a guaranteed separation of powers and free and fair elections^[9]. Thus, the establishment of rule of law and democratic state.

During the first years of the disintegration of the Soviet Union, the new Russian Federation combined a rapid economic liberalization with minor democratic transitional attempts. Indeed, the adoption of the Constitution in 1993 defined Russia as a democratic state, but the main focus in the transitional years was on economic liberalization and restructuring^[10]. Mendras argued that by the end of the 1990s, the Constitution of 1993 had already been violated on two fundamental issues: regional autonomy and free and fair elections. The fundamentals of regional autonomy within the federation and with respect for the rights of minorities, was violated with the military intervention in Chechnya in 1994^[11]. Again, during the 1996 presidential elections, the oligarchs used their power to ensure the victory of Boris Yeltsin and avoiding the winning of the communists in the elections^[12]. Even during 1995, the integrity of elections was questioned, although the extent to which fraud happened is a source of discussion. Presidential elections in Russia have been free but not fair. Furthermore, the Yeltsin succession lacked democratic credibility. Putin was appointed by “the family” as the new Russian president, and the presidential election of 2000 was a mere formality. As early as January 2000, Putin was able to grasp the support of 60 percent of the electorate^[13]. Thus, even without “registration of fictitious voters” and “the stuffing of large packets of ballots into boxes”, Putin probably would have survived the ballot boxes. This process of fraudulent elections to secure regime-supported victories went on during the 2004 presidential elections, the 2008 elections that signaled the change of presidency from Putin to Dimitri Medvedev and the 2012 presidential election, that restored Putin as president. The process of presidential succession in the 2007-2008 transition from Putin to Medvedev takes place in the “para-constitutional” state that Sakwa describes. The various factions within the state rivaled to put forward the new president, and in his role as

1 Mandel, D (2005), “Managed Democracy: Capital and State in Russia”, *Journal of Contemporary Central and Eastern Europe*, 13(2):pp 117-136.

2 Levitsky, S and Way, L.A. (2010), *Competitive Authoritarianism: Hybrid Regimes After the Cold War*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

3 Oversloot, H (2007), “Reordering the State (without changing the Constitution: Russia under Putin’s Rule, 2000-2008”, *Review of Central and Eastern European Law*, 32:pp 41-64.

4 Ibid, 46.

5 Sakwa, R (2011), *The Crisis of Russian Democracy: The Dual State, Factionalism and the Medvedev Succession*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

6 Colton, T.J. & McFaul, M (2003), *Popular Choice and Managed Democracy: The Russian Elections of 1999 and 2000*, Washington: Brookings Institution Press.

7 Ibid.

8 Mendras, M (2012), *Russian Politics: The Paradox of a Weak State*, London: Hurst and Company.

9 Ibid.

10 Ibid, 79.

11 Ibid, 102.

12 Ibid.

13 Colton, T.J. & McFaul, M (2003), *Popular Choice and Managed Democracy: The Russian Elections of 1999 and 2000*, Washington: Brookings Institution Press.

arbiter over factional rivalry^[14]. Putin eventually appointed Dimitri Medvedev as his successor. In doing so, Putin confirmed “that he would be looking for legitimate institutional methods to resolve the succession and continuity problems”^[15].

Thus, the election of a new president was not subjected to fair elections, although other candidates gained votes as well, such as Communist presidential candidate Gennady Zyuganov, who received 17.72 percent of the vote. Medvedev won the ballot with 70.28 percent, and although regional and local authorities were pressured to secure the desired outcome^[16], Medvedev gained “an unambiguous mandate from the Russian people”^[17]. The Russian people voted for the safe choice, in the absence of an attractive alternative. Elections were free, but not fair^[18]. Thus, in Russia’s managed democracy, the elections of presidents were free to the extent that multiple candidates participated in the ballot boxes and voters were free to choose among them, but to secure a desired win for the desired candidate by the regime, the elections were not fair. At elections, the outcome is certain, and electoral rules are rewritten to reach this outcome^[19].

Russia does not meet even the minimum definition of a consolidated democracy. Whereas elections in Russia are free, there is evidence to suggest that they are not necessarily fair. During election campaigns, incumbent politicians enjoy advantages in access to funds and the media. For example, according to the estimates by *Komsomolskaia pravda*, during the 1996 presidential election campaign, Yeltsin accounted for 75 per cent of the election coverage in print media and 90 per cent of TV coverage. One more example of the fraudulent elections was that in the absence of the federal legislation on the formation of organs of state power in Russia’s constituent units, and of the law on governors, incumbent governors were permitted to determine electoral rules. Many reportedly used the opportunity to draft laws that helped them to filter out potentially strong rivals. After each round of elections, the Russian press carries stories by volunteer workers at polling stations about the alleged falsification of results. Another shortcoming of the Russian system is that many important offices are still filled with appointed officials. This is particularly noticeable at the regional level, where governors try to keep the number of regional and local offices open for elections as low as possible. But even at the federal level, unelected members of the executive branch, whose functions are not specified by the constitution, have very broad powers, which exceeded those of elected officials. Thus, the chief of presidential staff, Anatolii Chubais, was a key figure in governmental decision-making during Yeltsin’s protracted illness in 1996.

Sovereign Democracy in Russia

The process of the idea of “sovereign democracy” began

with the establishment of the Vladimir Putin regime in Russia. Even before Surkov refined and framed the concept, Russian President Putin himself used it several times while emphasizing the necessity to implant the basic principles of Democracy and its institutions into Russia in such a way that they do not conflict with the country’s political reality, traditions, and history. From this point of view, the concept of sovereign democracy is a result of a long process of discourse since the country’s political, economic, and international crisis in the 1990s. After using the concept of “sovereign democracy” in an interview with a foreign reporter in 2006, Surkov specified his concept in greater detail in his article “Nationalization of Future,” which was published in *Expert*. Since then, the concept has become Russia’s political doctrine. While critical perspectives on this concept do exist, some fundamental and some marginal. The concept has been connected to, and received by, a fairly wide spectrum of ideological orientations from extreme right nationalism to relatively moderate positions. The concept of sovereign Democracy include the core elements of the nationalist consensus formed among the network of Russian ruling elite, such as strong state, strengthening of state functions in the economic arena, equal distribution, restoration of Russia’s international status as a superpower. The fact that the concept of sovereign democracy has received such positive reactions in diverse areas of discourse, including the mass media, reflects the importance of its political functions and its close association with Russia’s political reality. More specifically, the concept has served as an ideological tool for unifying widely different political forces that have accelerated since the early 2000s, and thus has been developed not only as an ideology for Putin’s regime but also as a party ideology for “United Russia.” After Surkov refined the concept of sovereign democracy, United Russia employed it as a basic principle for the party platform in December 2006. The party chairman, Boris Gryzlov, declared “we (United Russia) aim at building a sovereign democratic state. The concept of sovereign democracy is the only alternative for Russian people, and we take it as a natural principle”^[20]. The chairman of Russia’s Constitutional Court, Valentin Zorkin, stressed the constitutional base of the concept of sovereign democracy by stating, “Russia is a democratic sovereign state, according to its Constitution. It means that Russia is a democratic country with sovereignty and that this sovereignty is democratic”^[21]. In addition, many core politicians including co-chairman of Unified Russia, Sergey Schoygu and Yury Luschkov, the secretary of defense, Sergey Ivanov, the secretary of foreign affairs, Sergey Rarov, the mayor of Peterburg, Valentina Matvienko, and the president of Tatarstan, Mintimer Schaymiev have explicitly declared their support for sovereign democracy. The chairman of the Liberal Democratic Party, V. Zhirinovskiy, also expressed his support for the concept, when he said, “Surkov deals with matters that are essential for understanding the modern political context, and no one other than Surkov has been able to suggest main directions for the state development with a short-term prospect”^[22]. This process shows that the concept of sovereign democracy has contributed to the building of a coalition government

14 Sakwa, R (2011), *The Crisis of Russian Democracy: The Dual State, Factionalism and the Medvedev Succession*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

15 Ibid.

16 Ibid, 296.

17 Ibid, 292.

18 Ibid.

19 Krastev, I. and Holmes, S (2012) “Putinism under siege. An autopsy of managed democracy”, *Journal of Democracy*, 23(2):pp 33-45.

20 Ju, Jin-Sook, “Institutional Reform and Discourse on Democracy in Russia”, [Online:Web] Accessed 10 October 2016 URL: http://kaisnet.or.kr/resource/down/8_2_05.pdf

21 Ibid.

22 Ibid.

encompassing a wide range of political forces by providing them with an idea that corresponds to the ideological orientations of the Russian elite group. A three-stage analysis of the contents of Russia's democracy discourse as specified through the debate on sovereign democracy, and their effects on institutional reform has been discussed.

1. Adaptation

The concept of sovereign democracy demonstrates how Russia domestically has adapted the international norm of democracy. First, Russia's political discourse does not mind using the concept of democracy; it does not emphasize only the Russian peculiarity disconnected from international norms. In this respect, the discourse on sovereign democracy strives incessantly to achieve universality and generality. In other words, it is perfectly understood that Russia must be viewed as a case of universal democracy. As Surkov argued, "As exemplified by the fact that the German democracy differs from the French democracy not in essence but in the peculiar ways that they operate, there exist diverse traditions and diverse forms of democracy^[23]". In order to justify the institutional reform, he also compares Russia, directly or indirectly, with the history of Western European political systems and Western European politicians. For instance, as a rationale for strengthening presidential power, he mentions the U.S. presidential system and the French semi-presidential system. In the same vein, Putin's institutional reform is compared with that of U.S. President Franklin D. Roosevelt. The control of the Duma by United Russia and the party's rapid growth are emphasized as general phenomena where the former is compared with American political parties' control of Congress, and the latter with the rapid growth of the German Christian Democratic Party. It is often argued that Russia's totalitarian history in the twentieth century should be interpreted as a universal phenomena, comparable to Germany's history under Hitler, Italy's history under Mussolini, and Spain's history under Franco. The Russian elite group's strong support for a market economy, in particular, clearly demonstrated that the political discourse of Russia does not totally deny the concept of "democracy." It also reflects the Russian elite's selective adoption of democracy, as the country maintains a pro-Western position in cooperation for economic development, while refusing to be absorbed into the Western style liberal democracy. This emphasis on universality and selective adoption of democratic ideas may be a reflection of the coercive power of international norms. In other words, transitional societies like Russia are not completely free from the pressure to adopt international norms, and therefore international norms cannot help being introduced into the domestic context in one way or another.

At the same time, however, the concept of sovereign democracy also demonstrated how the international norms are combined with domestic norms, thus resulting in new ideas. This is manifested in the reinterpretation of the concept of democracy in the context of Russian history, which is distinguished from that of Western liberal democracies.

2. Definition of the Situation

23 Ju, Jin-Sook, "Institutional Reform and Discourse on Democracy in Russia", [Online:Web] Accessed 10 October 2016 URL: http://kaisnet.or.kr/resource/down/8_2_05.pdf

The concept of sovereign democracy, as it is based on the reinterpretation of the concept of democracy, also allows for an interpretation of crisis situations. More specifically, the concept of sovereign democracy first interprets the following two crisis situations: the restructuring of a new international order and the domestic political transition. Nearing the end of the Yeltsin regime, Russia was confronted externally with a dramatic fall in its international status as well as an economic collapse (i.e., national insolvency in 1997). Internally, Russia also had to resolve the serious problem of reconstructing the state after experiencing the second Chechen war and a series of terrorist attacks in 1999. What is suggested as the most important and serious task in such a crisis situation is the maintenance of external state sovereignty and the strengthening of internal sovereignty. In his article, "Russian Political Culture," published in 2007, Surkov asked the following questions "The reason why (Western powers) approach Russia is to purchase oil, gas, and lumber. In the international division of labor, we are far from engineers, bankers, designers, and producers. We are just oil drilling workers, drivers, and woodcutters. But why should it be the case? Aren't we the nation that takes pride in a high quality education and a high cultural level?^[24]" What the concept of sovereign democracy concentrates foremost on is the interpretation of the international political situation and the redefining of Russian interest. The central argument of the proponents of sovereign democracy with regard to the international political situation can be summarized as "Russia's falling into the periphery" and "the emergence of a unipolar order under the US hegemony" in the process of restructuring of international power relations. The global balance has been destroyed, and one empire is building its own ideological system in order to rule the world.

Sovereign democracy, then, is put forward as a concept resisting U.S. hegemony in terms of both ideology and foreign policy. In the midst of globalization and worldwide competition that is threatening Russia, the country must strengthen its competitiveness by securing energy resources and utilizing the strategic communication business and energy related technologies. It is also argued that the country should pursue the modernization of its strategic nuclear forces and military forces against the security threat. In other words, with the progress of unfair globalization, Russia needs sovereignty in order to have sufficient competitiveness, and global energy security is a way to secure Russia's sovereignty. Here, the concept of sovereignty symbolizes Russia's strategic approach to globalization. "Russia has to participate in producing fair rules of globalization. It must veto a monopoly by one or two countries in such areas that could determine the survival of states, and support the building of new communication and transportation system, and the establishment of a high-technology international center".

3. Institutional Construction

According to Blyth's^[25] hypotheses, ideas are not simply weapons for criticizing and attacking the existing order and institutions, but also offer a blueprint for constructing a new institutional order after destroying the old one. The concept

24 Ibid.

25 Blyth, M (2002), *Great Transformation: Economic Ideas and Institutional Change in the Twentieth Century*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

of sovereign democracy performs this constructive function for Russia. Based on his interpretation of the international and domestic crises and redefinition of national interests, Surkov ^[26] suggests a couple of specific policy programs for the realization of a Russian style democracy. His policy programs provide not only a logic for justifying the institutional reform of the Putin regime, but also a direction for the subsequent institutional reform process. First, Surkov suggested that the whole territory of Russia be united under the sole and centralized state, and that the president should exercise power over the governors of federal states. This way, centralized control of the federal states' administration and budget system could be constructed.

Second, Surkov suggested that the dispersed political forces be integrated into strong, national-level political parties with the adoption of a Proportional Representation (PR) system for the Duma election. He also recommended banning of the small political parties based on regions, religions, and occupations, so that political parties could not only differentiate between voters on the basis of ideologies and issue positions, but also contributed in integrating the entire people through common, shared values. In other words, he emphasized the importance of maintaining the principles of the Russian style multi-party system, in which voters are divided, yet the people are integrated. In order to justify this policy of centralizing power and strengthening presidential power, Surkov compares US President Roosevelt in the 1930s and Russian President Putin in the 1990s. His argument was that under an economic crisis, the centralization of power through the strengthening of administrative organizations and presidential power is inevitable.

As demonstrated by the above policy proposals, the main direction of party system reform, suggested by the concept of sovereign democracy, implies clearly the exclusion of liberal opposition party forces. Dmitrij Orlov ^[27] emphasised that the revised election laws "have contributed in isolating anti-regime opposition parties such as Michail Kashjanov's party and in institutionalizing the parliamentary opposition parties". In addition, they have laid the foundation for the emergence of a new majority party (United Russia) led by Putin. According to Putin, this majority party has the central function of "realizing national policies through laws, decrees, and orders."

A similar vision of institutional reform appeared in Putin's speech which was announced in October 2006. It was no coincidence that Surkov's concept of sovereign democracy and policy proposals were also publicized around that time. According to Putin, the main issue in local institutional reform should be the stabilization of state power and the issue of constructing a socioeconomic complex over the whole territory should be viewed from this perspective of state development. More specifically, it referred to "completing a mechanism that links the central and local administrative powers in various areas". While Putin set the strengthening of local autonomy as one of the main goals in state strategy, he also emphasized that this strengthening of local governments should be accompanied by the building of an objective system, which would not only make local governments work effectively but also leads to an increase

in the federal government's responsibility.

Conclusion

Democracy is a path, not a goal, and every country in the world walks along it the best it can. This ability to transit the democratic path depends on culture, history and present objective conditions namely the economy, political institutions, poverty, religion or even natural resources. There is democracy in Russia. However, it exists with its own uniqueness, regarding the Russian reality and condition that affects democracy itself. The independent Russian Federation which began to exist after the collapse of the Soviet Union is a young country that lies in the initial stage of the path towards Democracy.

Moreover, talking about history, what are the democratic precedents of Russia? Not much to be honest. There was simply no democracy in Russia until recent times. Unfortunately, the Russian historical tradition is anti-democratic. Both under the emperors and under the Communists, power was authoritarian, or even totalitarian; there was no civil society, free markets, human rights, etc. So it is very natural for Russia to take time for transition.

There are no perfect democratic systems. Every politic regime has its flaws, even those who wave the flag of "democratic saviors" all around the world. Russia is part of those "imperfect" democracies of the world. There are few democratic precedents in Russia's history. This does not define Russian society as unable to practice democracy. Russia is a democratic country, but certainly not by Western standards. There are free elections and a variety of political parties; there is a Constitution that rules the political life; there has been a rotation in the executive power with three presidents in 27 years, etc. The standard notion of the Western concept of Democracy may not fit well in the case of Russia, but, Russia has gone a long way towards breaking with its authoritarian past. The use of free, multi-candidate elections as the means of selecting leaders to a number of top offices, toleration of political opposition, the creation of the Constitutional Court to monitor politicians' compliance with the constitution; the abolition of political censorship of the media; freedom to travel and to set up political parties; and the legalization of private ownership – all these are democratic achievements of considerable importance in the Russian context.

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