

Russia's Soft Power Ambitions

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The European Union thinks of itself as a 'soft power', which is defined by Joseph Nye as the "ability to get what you want through attraction rather than through coercion" and which can "be cultivated through relations with allies, economic assistance, and cultural exchanges."¹ Few would think that Russia has 'soft power' ambitions, but the truth is that Russia has started to invest in the infrastructure of a soft power.

The moment of truth for Russia came with the 'Orange Revolution' in Ukraine, when the power of ideas was revealed by events. Konstantin Kosachev, Chairman of the foreign affairs committee of the Russian Duma was puzzled by such developments. For him, "the situation is absurd" when post-Soviet states enjoy more benefits from cooperating with Russia and still they want to "enter into the straitjacket of European institutions and to fall under the diktat of Brussels."² This happens because Russia "cannot explain the purpose of its presence in the post-Soviet Union... The West is doing this under the banner of democratisation, and one gets the impression we are doing it only for the sake of ourselves... Our activeness is following too openly Russian interests. This is patriotic but not competitive."³ Thus, Russia realised that its policy suffers from an 'ideological emptiness'.⁴ This had to be

redressed both inside as well as outside Russia.

The first front for Russia's new soft power ambition is domestic. Putin's administration, represented by its deputy chief Vladislav Surkov, has been working on the development of 'sovereign democracy'⁵ as a concept that should be the backbone of Russia's 'national idea'. It is not easy to grasp what 'sovereign democracy' means exactly. The concept is deliberately vague, and the debate still ongoing.⁶ Nevertheless, this notion is centred around two core ideas. First is the idea of sovereignty. This concept is understood as non-interference from the West. The emphasis on 'sovereign democracy' is meant as a counter-example to post-revolutionary Ukraine and Georgia, which in Moscow's view are ruled from the outside. Second, is the idea that Russia has its own set of values. These values are democratic, but they emerge from Russia's unique historical experience, and they are

Political Studies and Public Administration in Bucharest, has suggested this term.

⁵ See for example Vladislav Surkov, "Suverenitet eto politicheskii sinonim konkurentnosposobnosti", *Moskovskie Novosti*, 10 March 2006 (<http://www.mn.ru/issue.php?2006-8-1>).

⁶ There is a certain debate in Russia whether 'sovereign democracy' is a proper way to describe Russia's direction. For example, Deputy Prime Minister Dmitri Medvedev opposes the term because it leaves a "weird aftertaste". However, these discussions refer to the proper packaging of Russia's development, rather than the essence and the direction of it. See interview by Dmitri Medvedev, *Ekspert journal*, 24 July 2006 (http://www.expert.ru/politics/2006/07/interview_medvedev/).

distinct from what the West understands as democracy. Thus, Russia's democracy should not necessarily correspond to Western standards of democracy. As Sergei Ivanov, Russia's defence minister puts it, "if there is western democracy, there should be an eastern democracy as well".⁷

On paper, the ideology of 'sovereign democracy' is presented as if it were not that different from what is understood in the West by democracy. But the reality is different. The rule of law, protection of minorities, a free press, a viable political opposition, or legally guaranteed property rights are not part of the reality of the 'sovereign democracy'. From the jailing of Khodorkovsky, to the assassination of Politkovskaya, from the witch hunts against Georgians or North Caucasians (after Beslan), to problems with Western businesses over, for example, oil and gas development on Sakhalin Island, the actual functioning of this 'sovereign democracy' raises many questions. Nikolai Petrov, a Russian expert, argues that sovereign democracy is "simply a new brand name for managed and centralised political development and can be considered to be the highest (and last?) stage of managed democracy"⁸ Vladimir Ryzhkov, a Russian MP with liberal

¹ Joseph Nye, *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*, New York, NY: Public Affairs, 2004.

² See Konstantin Kosachev, "Neftegazovaia Diplomatiia kak Ugroza Marginalizatsii", *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, 28 December 2004 (http://www.ng.ru/world/2004-12-28/5_uspeh.html).

³ Ibid.

⁴ Stanislav Secrieru, a specialist on Russian foreign policy at the National School of

⁷ "Ministr Oborony Soobshil Inostrannym Jurnalistam chto Sushchestvuet Osobaya Vostochnaya Demokratiia", *Newsru.com*, 12 July 2004 (<http://www.newsru.com/arch/russia/12jul2004/democracy.html>).

⁸ Nikolai Petrov, "From Managed Democracy to Sovereign Democracy: Putin's regime evolution in 2005", *PONARS Policy Memo* 396, December 2005.

views, states that “constitutional principle of the people as sovereign is being replaced by the unconstitutional notion of sovereign democracy. This term implies just the opposite of democracy. It means limiting democracy and political competition and indulging the ruling elite’s desire to preserve its power by any means necessary”.⁹

The idea of ‘sovereign democracy’ has a number of functions. The first is to provide Putin’s authoritarianism with respectable ‘democratic’ clothes in order to strengthen it internally and insulate it from international criticism. The second is to challenge the West’s idea of democracy and human rights as a set of universal values and practices. As a result of the ‘colour revolutions’ in Ukraine and Georgia, Russia’s leaders learned that crude manipulation might not be enough to remain in power, that ideas matter and that NGOs can make revolutions. They have also learned that a ‘legitimacy deficit’ can undermine the elites. Thus the Kremlin had to develop its tools for ideological manipulation, enhance control of the circulation of ideas and the NGOs in a more proactive manner. Even the Russian Orthodox Church is involved in the project. The central question of a high-profile and much-publicised congress of the Russian Church was: “Are Western standards of human happiness applicable to all countries and cultures?” The answer is a clear no. In the words of the Church’s main ideologue Miropolit Kiril, Russia should develop its own version of what human rights are and promote it internationally in order to oppose the West’s “dictatorial stance” that all other traditions “must be silenced and subdued.”¹⁰

A second front for Russia’s new ideological drive is external. Vitalii Tretyakov, a well-known Russian journalist close to the Kremlin, is blunt in stating that “Sovereign democracy is

the historical destiny of Russia... It is not only a positive fact but also a burden because under the wings of countries with maximum sovereignty, other countries and peoples are gathering. And we become responsible for them.”¹¹ Thus, Russia’s ‘sovereign democracy’ is not just about deflecting criticism from the West, but also about extending this ‘sovereignty’ to Russia’s neighbours. Nikolai Patrushev, Russia’s head of Federal Security Service (FSB) is even more outspoken. He states: “Non-governmental organisations must not be allowed to engage in any activity they like... We are interested in unifying the respective laws of the Community of Independent States into clear legislation on the activity of NGOs. The NGOs must be told what problems they should tackle and for what purpose and they should engage in activity of that kind... The Constitution and laws must be changed before the wave of orange revolutions spread to the leaders of the Commonwealth of Independent States.”¹²

Russia’s way to consolidate its political regime and strengthen its dominance in its neighbours is increasingly creative and pro-active. Gas prices and trade embargoes are not the only tools to extend Russian influence. In Ivan Krastev words, the major objective of the Russian policy “is to develop an efficient infrastructure of ideas, institutions, networks and media outlets that can use the predictable crisis of the current orange-type regimes to regain influence not simply at the level of government but at the level of society as well. Russia will not fight democracy in these countries. Russia will fight for democracy – *its* kind of democracy.”¹³

Russia invests in the development of NGO infrastructure, and enhancing its channels to bring across the Kremlin’s message at all levels. Various Kremlin supported organisations are mushrooming. The scope of their activity is truly all-encompassing.

Russia-friendly and Russia-financed NGOs and think-tanks have emerged in many CIS states and even in the secessionist entities. For example, in Ukraine, Russian political technologists are busy advancing the idea of a ‘sovereign Ukraine’,¹⁴ which should not “sacrifice its long struggle for independence and national revival” and should not “give away its national sovereignty to the European bureaucracy”.¹⁵ In the South Caucasus, a so-called ‘Caucasus Institute for Democracy’ with branches in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, as well as in Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia has been very active recently.¹⁶ The institute organises regular roundtables, supports cultural activities, and has even launched a FM radio station in South Ossetia (Aizald-FM) and a newspaper in Abkhazia (*Gudok-Abkhazia*). In Moldova, a Free Europe-Moldova Foundation was created recently and its links to Russia have been obvious. The Russian authorities have been boosting a CIS election monitoring organisation (CIS-EMO) whose verdicts for elections conducted in the CIS have always been diametrically opposed to OSCE opinions on the elections.

Inside Russia, these ‘soft power’ weapons are older and better developed. They comprise media outlets, youth movements, internet websites, expert networks (www.kreml.org), regular conferences and even publishing houses. It is not difficult to see that such outlets are part of the same network. They have links to each other, and the same faces, commentaries and ideas are simultaneously advanced by such outlets.

They look like a network, but they are vertically integrated in a huge ‘public relations’ machine. They often lead to a restricted group of political technologists close to or inside the Kremlin, such as Gleb Pavlovski or Modest Kolerov. The latter is head of

⁹ Vladimir Ryzhkov, “Sovereign Democracy and the Usurper State”, *The Moscow Times*, 16 August 2005.

¹⁰ Speech by Mitropolit Kirill of Smolensk and Kaliningrad, chairman of the foreign affairs department of the Moscow Patriarchate; “Prava Cheloveka i Nравstvennaia Otvetstvennost”, X Russkii Narodnyi Sobor, 4 April 2006 (<http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/102261.html>).

¹¹ Rossiiskaya Gazeta, “Suverennoe Gosudarstvo v Usloviiah Globalizatsii”, 6 September 2006 (<http://www.rg.ru/2006/09/06/diskussia.html>).

¹² Newtimes.ru, “No Retreat from the Cold”, July 2005 (http://www.newtimes.ru/eng/detail.asp?art_id=1398).

¹³ Ivan Krastev, “Russia’s Post-Orange Empire”, *Opendemocracy.net*, 20 October 2005.

¹⁴ See interview by Gleb Pavlovski in *Kazhastankaya Pravda*, 27 July 2004 (<http://kreml.org/media/61409251>).

¹⁵ See interview with Modest Kolerov, *Kreml.org*, 20 July 2004 (<http://kreml.org/interview/60835783>); as quoted in Igor Torbakov, “Ukrainian Elections: Kremlin Agitprop at Work”, *Jamestown Foundation*, 29 September 2004.

¹⁶ The website is <http://www.caucasusid.com/>.

the directorate for interregional and cultural ties with foreign countries in the Presidential Administration of Russia which was created to coordinate this type of ‘soft power’ activities.¹⁷ A typical example of how these networks reproduce themselves is the Evropa publishing house, which was co-founded by the Russian Institute (www.russ.ru – a Pavlovski project), by Regnum.ru, a website set-up by Kolerov, and a respected economic journal *Ekspert*. The same group also organised a series of conferences and seminars under the banner of a European Forum (www.europeforum.info). And the above-mentioned Caucasus Institute for Democracy publishes its books at the Evropa publishing house. One need not go far to see where the traces of ‘independent’ outlets lead to. And that the heavy use of such words as democracy, Europe, freedom, etc. is simply an instance of ‘virtual politics’, designed to disguise a different reality.¹⁸

The challenge of these ‘soft power’ instruments is serious. Such enterprises are not Soviet-type propaganda. Nor are they true attempts to promote democracy and pluralism. They are designed to create an intellectual milieu of sophisticated, though tricked, ideological support for the current Russian authorities. They also serve as a source of ideology for the Kremlin’s pragmatists. The latter are driven by financial and power interests, not ideas or norms. But they seek to strengthen further their power by complementing it with a ‘soft’ dimension. It is the new face of ‘smart authoritarianism’ that speaks the language of Western norms and is very flexible, but has very little to do with the values of democracy, Eastern- or Western-style.

¹⁷ For an article on Modest Kolerov’s appointment in the Presidential Administration see “Putin Appoints Velvet Counterrevolutionary”, 23 March 2005, *Kommersant* (<http://www.kommersant.com/page.asp?id=556859>).

¹⁸ Andrew Wilson, *Virtual Politics: Faking Democracy in the Post-Soviet World*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005.

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