

# From Managed Democracy to Sovereign Democracy

## Putin's Regime Evolution in 2005

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The first year of Russian President Vladimir Putin's second term has been disastrous. A series of crises has occurred, from the assassination of Chechen President Akhmad Kadyrov in Grozny in May 2004, to the widespread demonstrations against the government's seriously flawed attempt to replace social and other benefits with cash payments. Fighters staged raids in Grozny and Ingushetia, the government provoked a minor banking crisis, the Kremlin suffered humiliation and failure in its attempts to influence elections in Abkhazia and Ukraine, and a battle has raged inside the Kremlin for control of Yukos. All these have demonstrated the ineffectiveness of the managed democracy (MD) regime construct.

However, rather than reassessing its ineffective efforts to manage democracy, the Kremlin went forward with a package of political reforms and other moves, thereby further increasing management by non-democratic means, while trying at the same time to deflect critics with the slogan of *sovereign democracy*. These changes include electoral reform, a tightening of control over political parties and civil society, the appointment of governors instead of their direct election, and also a number of youth, media, and public relations projects. Sovereign democracy is simply a new brand name for managed and centralized political development and can be considered to be the highest (and last?) stage of MD. The Kremlin, when inventing the new term, had in mind two

basic features of sovereign democracy: the primacy of sovereignty over democracy and a sovereign Russian democratic institutional development which does not correspond to Western standards.

Many Western experts tend to provide a simplistic analysis of MD, which is a political system that has a complicated structure and specific functions. Lack of understanding or ignorance of its rules leads to underestimation of the negative consequences of the structure. MD, just like other functioning political systems, should be understood in terms of political physics: for every action, there is an equal but opposite reaction.

## Basic MD Features

Managed democracy, as built in Putin's Russia, is a complex and echeloned system, which makes it possible for authorities to avoid being controlled by society while preserving a mask of democratic procedure. The system entails control over actors, over institutions, and over the rules of the game.

The basic elements of Putin's MD are: 1) a strong presidential system of state management together with the weakening of other institutions, including both houses of parliament, the judiciary, business, and regional elites; 2) state control over media, which is used to distribute information in doses and to shape (and even control) public opinion; 3) control over elections, which changes them from a means for society to control the government into a means of legitimizing decisions made by elites.

Weakened institutions are being replaced by substitutes with no independent legitimacy and which are controlled by the president. They are regulated by presidential decrees and include the State Council and Security Council, numerous presidential councils, and the Public Chamber. With their center of gravity in the president's office, this set of substitute institutions sits too high to provide stability. The resulting system is oversimplified and involves individuals whose personal interests diverge from overall national interests. The system as a whole is not as sensible as the individuals who serve in it.

As an unnatural hybrid, MD, just like a mule, cannot reproduce itself. It needs hands-on management and constant intervention. Combining the disadvantages of both command and democratic systems, it requires complicated oversight. Without constant control from above and given the lack of citizen control, mid-level elites are strongly tempted to use the system to their own advantage.

## Elections and Managed Democracy

Elections are the most technically refined ingredient of MD. The electoral system consists of obstacles to the opposition and mechanisms for government control of the process. These include the system for gathering

and checking signatures; candidate reporting on profits and property; the volume and technicalities of campaign financing; forbiddingly high thresholds for selecting candidates; selective enforcement of rules; and political control of election commissions, law enforcement agencies, and courts. To date, the system has ensured that Kremlin-backed candidates get elected. A second objective – keeping up the appearance of democracy – has proven far more difficult. The flip side of managed democracy is growing voter protest. Many Russians choose to protest passively by staying away from the polls: voter turnout of 20-30% is common.

All indications are that the state will continue to shift toward authoritarianism, with something like a Soviet-style and purely decorative form of managed democracy. Voting has not yet been made obligatory, but there are signs of the old system of compulsory participation. As the electoral laws are revised, the option of voting for “none of the above” will very likely be removed, as has already happened in Moscow.

Until now, we have seen managed democracy in action only at the federal level, in a situation where the number one candidate (Vladimir Putin) is extremely popular with voters. In such a case, the system overreacts, securing higher turnout and voter support even though it is not needed for victory. Managed democracy cannot be placed at the mercy of such unpredictable factors as the popularity of the regime’s chosen candidates. It serves not societal but elite class interests by turning elections into a rigged lottery. Recent elections in the ultra-democratic St. Petersburg and the war-torn Chechnya have clearly shown what will happen if the incumbent does not enjoy broad support. In both cases, candidates whose poll numbers were higher than those of the Kremlin’s candidate were barred from running.

## **MD and Federalism**

Managed democracy is unstable in its present form. It is a transitional stage between the chaotic democratic model of the Boris Yeltsin years and a more authoritarian model. Yeltsin’s democracy in a weak state gave regional governors considerable freedom, allowing them to rule like medieval princes and making Russia a “federation of tyrannies.” As of 2005, governors are no longer elected but appointed. Even as early as 2000, however, gubernatorial elections became ever more formalistic, reflecting an ongoing centralization and diminishment of federalism. Abolition of elections has ended Russia’s experiment with federalism, turning the country into a unitary state.

The absence of elections at the regional level not only shrinks the space for democratic processes but decreases the effectiveness of regional economies by turning governors into officials, loyal to the Kremlin. There is, however, remarkable continuity among the newly appointed governors, 80 percent of whom are holdovers. They will not be

constrained by the need to perform for their constituents or by facing their judgment in four years' time.

Although Russia ultimately can be truly democratic only as a federal state, the result of the weakening of regional barons has been contradictory. While at the national level it has contributed to the weakening of democracy, political competition and pluralism have increased in some regions due to the weakening of their regional bosses.

## **MD and Civil Society**

MD affects civil society in two ways. First, control over society by the state weakens and constrains the civil space. Second, because federal authorities cannot deliver social services effectively, they seek to shift the burden to others. In making the citizenry dependent on the state, however, MD unintentionally strengthens civil society which must respond to the constant crises created by the system. Nothing contributed to the development of civil society more in 2005 than the Kremlin itself—first spontaneously, by causing huge social unrest, and then ever more systematically through the poorly-planned and implemented monetization of social services.

## **MD and Youth**

Russia's leadership pursues several objectives through MD in dealing with youth. The major objective is to keep the majority out of politics and to imbue Russia's youth with statist, nationalist-patriotic, and religious Orthodox ideas. This is accomplished through electronic media, with a number of new channels recently established. Recruitment is achieved by means of organizing a quasi-Komsomol, in the form of youth branches of the Kremlin-backed parties (United Russia, Party of Life) and channeling social activism into controlled fora such as youth parliaments. In 2005, several new youth projects were launched by the Kremlin (with Nashi [Ours] the most noticeable) to prepare a counter-revolutionary force to be used against possible protesters.

These youth initiatives also have an electoral dimension. Given the uncertainty about the transfer of power in 2008, Russia's political clans are advancing different youth projects, for use in their own intensifying competitions in the context of weakening political parties.

## **MD: Prospects for the Future**

One might think, as a result of recent Kremlin efforts, that managed democracy has become even more manageable as it has become less democratic. The Kremlin seems to think that elections are only good for the opposition and that the fewer options available on the ballot, the better. Undoubtedly, democracy is not perfect, and direct elections, as one of its most important features, is no exception. However, Winston

Churchill's famous assertion that democracy was still better than anything humanity has managed to come up with applies also to the leaders in the Kremlin. They have done more than block all the possibilities for opposition members to take part in government decisionmaking. They have also plugged up all the outlets for the public to let off steam. The Kremlin is turning the political system into a pressure cooker. At the same time, the authorities continue to dismantle the last traces of the system that protected the public from the corrupt and the incompetent. They keep turning up the heat underneath the cooker by instituting badly planned and badly executed reforms that have unpredictable consequences.

It is a matter of life and death that the authorities increase the flexibility and stability of the political system by decentralizing and re-federalizing it. The government needs to re-establish communication with the public and break the giant monolith of the power vertical into three flexibly connected power horizontals at the federal, regional, and local levels.

The Kremlin also needs to open Russia's legislatures to the political opposition at all levels in order to send the energy of social protest flowing into parliamentary channels. It needs to shore up the democratic institutions that have been undermined by five years of the Putin regime. These institutions include the representative branch of government and the electoral process. Otherwise, the risk that the political system will collapse completely will become too great.

However, the Kremlin continues to roll mindlessly in precisely the opposite direction. Russia's leaders keep throwing up new barriers barring opposition parties from the Duma. They have turned the elections that remain into a farce. The major point is that the Kremlin has already far exceeded limits to management, and restoration of democracy, at least partial, is in the interests not only of society but of the Kremlin itself.

