

Russia's "Over-Managed Democracy" in Crisis

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Two years ago, when evaluating the hybrid regime of "over-managed democracy" (OMD) that Vladimir Putin constructed during his two presidential terms, I concluded that this regime was transitory; it had to develop toward either democracy or authoritarianism. Since then, Russia's OMD has survived not only a presidential succession, but a year of economic crisis that has exacerbated the system's shortcomings. Its survival raises the question of whether I underestimated OMD's sustainability or whether an unforeseen political evolution took place that provided a new stability to the system. The short answer is neither; the political system has undergone slight modifications, but with no increase in managerial effectiveness. The respite has been bought at the expense of huge financial resources, accumulated at a time of high oil prices.

The Putin-Medvedev Administration: Variation on a Theme

The term "over-managed democracy" does not imply that Russia is democratic. The over-managed democracy built in Putin's Russia is a complex multi-tiered system that enables the government to eliminate public control and accountability while preserving a façade of adherence to democratic procedures. There are three tiers of control in Putin's OMD system: (1) a strong presidential system of management that supersedes all other institutions and actors, including parliament, the judiciary, business, and regional elites; (2) state control of the media, which shapes public opinion through carefully dosed and filtered messages; and (3) controlled elections, which serve to legitimize decisions made by the political elite.

As is commonly observed, it would be a mistake to regard Dmitri Medvedev's ascent to the presidency in Russia as a real transfer of power. When Medvedev was

elected, the word "tandemocracy" was coined to describe the new political system. This regime, however, is simply a continuation of the one that coalesced during Putin's second presidential term. Russia's personified system of power, coupled with the weak institutions that Putin created, made a real transition impossible without risking the many intra-elite agreements Putin himself guaranteed.

The system did undergo some slight adjustments, however. These included:

- A shift to autopilot, i.e., the adoption of an economic strategy, as well as domestic and foreign policy doctrines, to guide the regime;
- The utilization of state corporations, controlled by Putin's cronies, to manage key branches of the economy and industrial modernization;
- The distancing of *siloviki* politicians with roots in Russia's "power" ministries from influential *siloviki* operatives, cutting the latter out of power; and
- The installation of Medvedev as, effectively, the head of the public relations department of "Russia, Inc.," while keeping Putin on as chairman and chief executive officer.

The political reforms that have taken place since Medvedev took office in May 2008 can be roughly classified as democratic, antidemocratic, and those that have no real impact. Other than a few purely decorative features, there is still no democracy in Russia. In fact, its dismantling has continued over the past year. If a few years ago, the "glass was half-empty, and leaking," to use Michael McFaul's colorful expression, it is now three-quarters empty.

Ultimately, despite numerous stylistic changes, the essence of the regime remains as it was before. There has been no clear movement in one direction or the other but rather a series of chaotic moves. Top-down democratic change has been modest and often implemented after relevant institutions, such as political parties, have already been emasculated. Any real steps toward democratization have resembled a kind of reactive liberalization from below, less formal than more institutionalized antidemocratic reforms, and potentially less stable.

Still, large-scale change in the political system is not only inevitable, it is happening. There is a revival of public engagement in politics, and political competition is intensifying, if only mainly within the United Russia ruling party. The party has held primaries, stumped for public support in large-scale meetings, conducted internal discussions on party development, and held public debates with other parties. Civil servants and regional party functionaries are increasingly showing signs of open defiance of the federal leadership. Political organization is becoming more complex, as evidenced by an increase in effective centers of influence. These changes, though fragmentary and unsystematic, are positive, and their accumulation may soon lead to evolutionary change.

The question, however, is whether the system can survive until then. Russia's political system may look stable, but its stability is based not on the country's institutions, but on the personal popularity of the ruling duo (with Medvedev's popularity largely reflecting that of Putin). Nothing has been done to strengthen

political institutions in the last two years, and the single institution strengthened under Putin, the presidency, has now also weakened. Moscow is currently expending colossal resources to preserve its paternalistic relationship with the population and to keep public approval high. When resources run out, there is a risk that approval ratings will collapse.

The Kremlin Doctor

Medvedev frequently sounds tough, and his public diagnosis of Russia's condition is often correct. His solutions, though, are utterly inadequate for the problems and challenges he articulates.

Political Parties

In Russia today, political parties fail to act as channels of direct feedback between government and society; their role in the political system is insignificant. Rather than strengthen the institutional role of political parties, Medvedev has proposed legislative amendments that are decorative, if not derisory. He slightly lowered the number of members required to register a party, and he offered one or two consolation seats in the State Duma to parties that cannot surpass the 7 percent barrier for entry but that exceed 5 percent (in the last parliamentary election, there were no such parties). Legislation alone cannot improve the party system.

The Staffing Crisis

The curtailing of public engagement in politics, particularly through the rejection of free elections and the direct appointment of governors, has resulted in a staffing crisis. Restoring free competition could have solved this problem. Instead, at Medvedev's behest, the Kremlin set up a so-called "personnel reserve" list, a multilevel system of qualified personnel with a "presidential" reserve at the top. Anonymous "authoritative" experts under the leadership of Sergei Naryshkin, head of the presidential administration, and Vladislav Surkov, his first deputy, compiled their own lists, which were then culled to put together the "presidential" list.

Regional Interests

Local and regional interests are crucial in light of Russia's enormous socioeconomic and ethnocultural diversity. The 2000-2002 reform of the Federation Council almost destroyed the system by which regional interests are represented at the center. Instead of restoring it, Medvedev's political reforms replaced one set of formal requirements for senators with another more formal set. Not only are regional interests not taken into account when decisions are made at the center, no attention is paid to the regional consequences of federal decisions. This leads to crises, as occurred in the Far East after the federal government raised tariffs to import used cars at the end of 2008, and in the North Caucasus the following year when the government doubled the minimum wage, leading to rising unemployment in some regions.

Nongovernmental Organizations

NGOs have been under heavy pressure from the federal government since 2005. The Kremlin viewed the color revolutions as NGO revolutions and thus aimed to legally

and financially control their activity. Not only did this result in a substantial decrease in NGOs, it also caused a drop in activism. Medvedev has tried to be friendlier to NGOs and has sought to facilitate their existence, especially of those organizations that do not receive financial support from abroad. However, simply tolerating these organizations does not repair the damage that has already been done. The lack of appropriate NGOs in Russia is clearly illustrated by the almost complete absence of public discussion on policymaking and strategies.

Elections

With such stringent electoral legislation, the only remaining function for elections is to legitimize power. As participation in elections declines, however, managing even this function becomes more difficult. At a time of crisis, elections should facilitate dialogue between government and society. They should also strengthen the social bases of power and make possible the selection and training of effective managers and the removal of ineffective ones. Finally, elections offer an opportunity to air frustrations. Far from strengthening the institutional role of elections, however, the Kremlin has increased its control. Parties and candidates can no longer register by paying a cash deposit, only by collecting signatures.

The Last Stage of Over-Managed Democracy?

The regime is reacting to Russia's crisis as if it were a fire brigade. It is concentrating on the socioeconomic aspects of the crisis, whereas Russia's really disastrous problems are in its flawed model of political organization. The gap between reality and this flawed political management is growing dangerously wide. There are no signs, however, that the regime realizes this and is prepared to react. Until the money runs out, a review of economic strategy, or of domestic or foreign policy, remains unlikely.

The current modification of Putin's model of over-managed democracy does not only fail to work well, it works less efficiently than it has in the past. In each sphere of official activity, several formal and informal centers of decisionmaking conflict publicly with one another, with Putin as the only real decisionmaker. The system resembles a model of late 18th or early 19th century tsarist autocracy, complete with Potemkin-style democratic institutions.

Russia's OMD has to be redesigned to meet new challenges, or it will be incapable of controlling the country. Four pillars of the model have to be revised: economic development, the crony-corporatist model of industrial modernization, domestic politics, and foreign policy. These revisions are already underway, but the rate of change is not fast enough to maintain, let alone increase, the system's sustainability in a time of crisis.

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