

Modernizing Sovereign Democracy?

RUSSIAN POLITICAL THINKING AND THE FUTURE OF THE “RESET”

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“We have changed,” was the main message of President Dmitry Medvedev’s speech at the June 2010 St. Petersburg Economic Forum (SPEF). Trying to persuade foreign governments and investors alike to provide support for his policy to modernize Russia, Medvedev created an image of his country as open and dynamic – a society that has taken a big step forward, in no small measure thanks to the actions of the government.

The language of this and other speeches made by the current Russian president stand in sharp contrast with the rhetoric of Vladimir Putin’s second presidential term, when the motto was “sovereign democracy.” Although Putin never formally endorsed this concept, he frequently relied on it in both policy choices and statements – most prominently in his February 2007 speech at the Munich Security Conference.

Dear friends,

We are truly modernizing Russia. Change does take time, but you can rest assured we will keep moving forward. The main decisions have already been made and a substantial number of projects are already launched.

Russia understands the tasks ahead in its development, and it is changing, changing for itself and for the entire world.

Thank you.

*PRESIDENT OF RUSSIA DMITRY MEDVEDEV
June 18, 2010, St. Petersburg*

Experts across the globe are trying to determine whether this visible change in rhetoric really signifies a new era in Russian foreign policy vis-à-vis the West. As always, policy developments are contradictory and provide enough evidence to prove that the glass is both half empty and half full. This memo relies on a broad range of sources to analyze Russian foreign policy thinking and tries to determine whether a change has really taken place at the conceptual level. My conclusion is that there remains in place a fundamental continuity. As a result, a continued improvement in relations with the European Union and the United States is bound to be limited to “pragmatic” cooperation. Any greater transformation will require a re-opening of dialogue on contentious political issues. This, however, must be done in a way that does not repeat the mistakes of the early post-Cold War era, when most Russians came to associate democracy with economic hardship and social disorder, and liberal values

were seen as being imposed from the West, which, especially after the 1999 Kosovo conflict, often made them look suspiciously like an effort to undermine Russia's sovereignty.

The Technocratic View of Democracy

A careful analysis of President Medvedev's statements postulating the need for and outlining the plans of modernization suggests at least one significant observation: they extensively rely on precepts of economic liberalism while mentioning only in passing the need to protect the political rights and freedoms of Russian citizens. The most radical manifestation of Medvedev's liberal political views, his Internet-based speech on the Day of Memory of the Victims of Political Repressions (October 2009), stressed the moral imperative to remember the tragic past rather than the need for political reform at present. While this declaration was intrinsically important, it hardly compared to the highly detailed descriptions of proposed economic, administrative, and legal reforms that Medvedev has put forward.

In a much-publicized address to senior Russian diplomats in July 2010, which had a strong emphasis on cooperation with the West, Medvedev mentioned the need to "consolidate institutions of democracy and civil society" only once, as a second priority after economic modernization. The remaining part of the speech, which offered more detailed guidelines for diplomats, focused exclusively on issues like technological cooperation, innovation, and investment.

Similarly, Medvedev's SPEF statement emphasized the importance of the "technological expansion of safeguards for freedom of speech, of web-based technologies in the functioning of the political and electoral systems for the development of the political system and political institutions." There is nothing wrong in linking information technology and democracy, but in the absence of a more far-reaching strategy of political reform, this statement revealed a technocratic approach to politics characteristic of both neo-liberalism in general and of the "liberals" in the Russian government in particular.

This way of thinking presents democracy not as the result of a resolute effort and critical re-evaluation of political reality, but as a by-product of "correct" technological and institutional solutions, free markets in particular. Being by no means exclusive to Russia, it creates a prerequisite for a possible rapprochement with like-minded political forces in the West. Yet at the same time, it also sets limits to mutual understanding, because the historical experience and political context in which this technocratic thinking operates are substantially different.

The Resilience of the Doctrine of Multipolarity

This de-politicized technocratic approach is especially conspicuous in how foreign policy priorities are set. It first emerged as far back as the early 2000s, when then-President Putin stated that the key aim of Russian foreign policy must be the well-being of Russia's citizens. This principle found its way into the foreign policy doctrines adopted in 2000 and again in 2008. It is also manifest in the title of the most recent

strategic document: *Program for the Effective Use of Foreign Policy Factors on a Systemic Basis for the Long-Term Development of the Russian Federation*. Such an approach suggests – and this is unambiguously stated in all key recent documents and statements – that the threat of a geopolitical confrontation with the West is a thing of the past. It has been replaced by competition between – to quote the 2008 foreign policy doctrine – “different value systems and developmental models, within the framework of universal principles of democracy and markets.”

Focusing foreign policy on pragmatic economic goals, however, is not enough to give it a sense of mission and direction. The result is that the old concept of multipolarity continues to dominate foreign policy thinking and practice. The *Program for the Use of Foreign Policy Factors* – even more than the foreign policy doctrine – abounds with references to traditional foreign policy goals inherited from both imperial Russian and Soviet times. The first target is to ensure “the long-term development of the Russian Federation” so as to protect its (real or imagined) great power status. This goal is phrased as the “preservation of sovereignty and territorial integrity, Russia’s solid and authoritative position in the world community,” and the “neutralization of any attempts to radically reform the UN Security Council to the detriment of the prerogatives of the current permanent members.” The document continues the old tradition of criticizing the “expansionist activism” of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and “imbalances in the work” of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (code phrase for too much emphasis on political freedoms and the status of democratic institutions). Russia’s traditional spheres of influence in post-Soviet Eurasia are another priority. The document recommends that Russia counter American “attempts to work toward disintegration, fragmentation, and separation from Russia of our geostrategic environment.” Also, “access to the Arctic by non-regional players, including NATO and the European Union” is to be prevented, while the Black Sea Fleet must be stationed indefinitely in Ukraine.

The Pseudo-Politics of Common Sense

At first glance, it might seem that these foreign policy documents simply represent a different trend in contemporary Russian politics than that reflected in presidential addresses. Inconsistency between, and even within, key strategic texts is nothing new for Russia. The foreign policy documents pay lip service to modernization, but this in and of itself is not proof of conceptual affinity.

What really links the two approaches is the attempt to present political decisions as self-evident by employing the language of common sense, thereby subordinating politics to technocratic management. In Medvedev’s rhetoric of modernization, the correct solutions are always already there. The challenge lies in implementing them by overpowering corruption and bureaucratic inertia. In a similar vein, Russia’s struggle for multipolarity in the international arena is presented by foreign ministry documents as a no-brainer. The main obstacle to universal harmony is the selfish and shortsighted policies of the West, in particular the United States, which struggles in vain to dominate the world.

Since his appointment in 2004, Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov has been the leading advocate of “great power pragmatism” (a term utilized by Russian-American scholar Andrei Tsygankov). In his opening letter to the *Program for the Use of Foreign Policy Factors*, Lavrov does his best to present the decline of Western hegemony and the arrival of the multipolar world as an objective reality. “The material basis of Western supremacy in global politics has been shaken” by the world economic crisis; this, according to Lavrov, is a welcome fact because the “unipolar, U.S.-centered configuration of the contemporary world financial system is a powerful source of instability.” The “imperatives of modernization,” he continues, “have become common to all states with no exception,” but it seems that some have difficulty reconciling themselves with this fact. “Right-wing conservative forces” in the United States are trying “to return to the confrontational policies of the previous administration” by pushing President Barack Obama toward expanding the “war on terror,” confronting Iran and China, and unilaterally developing an anti-ballistic missile defense system. In the long run, these policies have no chance of success because they run counter to the most fundamental trends in global politics and economics. In the short term, however, the risk of serious destabilization exists.

Prime Minister Putin goes even further by effectively accusing the West of neo-colonialism. Most importantly, he takes the next step by explicitly using these accusations to legitimize the current Russian regime: “Europeans came [to the colonies] with their regulations, their rules, to educate and civilize the natives. I have the feeling that this old tradition has transformed itself into a democratization drive in places where Europeans and our Western partners would like to secure a greater foothold.” While “there is much in the Russian political system that requires correction, change, and improvement,” such imperfections are, according to Putin, found everywhere and do not justify Western interventionism.

Democracy as a Global Challenge

Technocratic modernization cannot be accepted as a self-sufficient policy. By replacing politics with management, it tends to reduce reforms to improving the investment climate and bringing the Internet into every Russian home. A perverse example of where this leads in terms of freedom and justice is the move to protect entrepreneurs from imprisonment when charged with non-violent crimes. While a welcome step, this presidential initiative smacks of prioritizing the haves over the have-nots. Arguably, the rationale is that when business people suffer from their rights being violated, this does more harm to society as a whole than when “commoners” do. Fortunately, in this particular case, the negative effects seem to have been recognized; a more thorough revision of criminal procedure is now under consideration.

It is also quite characteristic that in his July 2010 speech Medvedev asserted that the key goal of Russia’s foreign policy is to “promote the material well-being of our citizens and their cultural development, [...] protection of their health and human dignity.” As usual, Russian leaders prefer to highlight the state’s role in “securing”

citizens' rights while never encouraging the people to stand up for their rights themselves at the grassroots level.

This logic is undoubtedly flawed and needs to be exposed as such. In a worst case scenario, it could lead today's reformers to repeat the mistakes their predecessors made in the early 1990s, when pro-market reforms took precedence over the need to consolidate Russia's fragile democracy. Similarly, the apparent de-politicization of the international agenda, manifest in the "forget about values, let's talk business" approach, in effect leaves in place old geopolitical thinking and action. The consequences of this are particularly detrimental in the post-Soviet space where Moscow is trying hard to counterbalance the West – apparently without any clear idea of why this is necessary, let alone how this helps achieve the declared goal of modernization.

If nothing is done about this predicament, it is bound to produce yet another confrontation at the next sharp turn on the international political scene. Big political issues, such as democracy, human rights, and the future of the international order, must therefore be returned to the agenda. At the same time, one probably can agree with Lavrov that a return to the pro-democracy interventionism of the George W. Bush years is not an option. Western haughtiness repeatedly alienated Russia over the last 15 years, and there are no grounds to believe that it will not lead to the same result a second time around.

Instead of preaching, which only encourages phantasms like "sovereign democracy," emphasis must be placed on persuading Russia to move from technocratic modernization to full-scale political reform. This can only be done, however, if Russia's Western partners are ready to agree that no democracy is perfect and are able to combine their criticism of Russia with self-critical reflections on their own democratic records.

Viewed in this light, the most significant foreign policy innovation in Medvedev's July 2010 speech was his offer to start working together with the West to formulate common standards of democracy. In a September 2010 speech in Yaroslavl, Medvedev tried to formulate what these standards might be. Even if some of his ideas sound controversial, the invitation to debate should not be ignored.

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