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LIBERAL INTERNATIONALISM RECKONING WITH HISTORY: SOVEREIGN DEMOCRACY *VERSUS* LIBERAL DEMOCRACY *

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EL INTERNACIONALISMO LIBERAL Y SU RECONCILIACIÓN LA HISTORIA: DEMOCRACIA SOBERANA *VERSUS* DEMOCRACIA LIBERAL

Abstract

This paper examines the main characteristics of the *suverennaja demokracija* (sovereign democracy) as theorized by Vladislav Jur'evič Surkov and by Alexander Geļevič Dugin. Through textual analysis, the prerogatives of this model, which places itself in antithesis to liberalism, communism, and fascism, will be highlighted as a fourth political theory. The *suverennaja demokracija* assumes the character of a *praxeology* that elaborates maxims for human action and formulates predictions on the basis of experience, becoming an “ideology for the future” that does not allow any external ideological loans or contamination, and that posits itself in opposition to globalization and to those hegemonies that have generated forms of mass surveillance. As such, it is founded on deglobalization and on re-sovereignization, configuring itself as a *democratura* that destabilizes the rule of law.

Keywords

sovereign democracy; Putinian ideology; Surkov; Dugin.

Resumen

Este artículo examina las principales características de la soberanía democrática, tal como las teorizan Vladislav Jurèvič Surkov y Alexander Geļevič Dugin. A través del análisis textual se resaltarán las prerrogativas de este modelo, que se sitúa en la antítesis del liberalismo, el comunismo y el fascismo como cuarta teoría política. La soberanía democrática asume el carácter de una praxeología que elabora máximas para la acción humana y formula predicciones con base en la experiencia, para convertirse en una “ideología para el futuro” que no permite préstamos ni contaminación ideológica externa, y que se opone a la globalización y a aquellas hegemonías que han generado formas de vigilancia masiva. Como tal, se fundamenta en la desglobalización y la resoberanización y se configura como una democracia que desestabiliza el Estado de derecho.

Palabras clave

democracia soberana; ideología putiniana; Surkov; Dugin.

Introduction

Is it perhaps the case to recover the analytical categories of the *Great Game*,¹ as elaborated by Peter Hopkirk (1992), in order to begin to discuss the identification strategies that undergird the Putinian project of the “special operation” launched against Ukraine on February 24, 2022, so that we can understand the ideological foundations of the theoretical paradigm of “sovereign democracy”? Or is it the case that the reflective and interpretative centrality assumed by scholars and analysts in the last year is a better fit to help us understand the new modalities of action of Russian politics in the Putin era? Certainly, the latest work by Yuri Colombo, *La Russia dopo Putin*, published in 2022, brings forth interesting clues in this regard. In fact, the content of the book, as well as the discursive plot of the arguments, does not stray from Hopkirk’s analytic framework nor from the extensive literature that has flourished since the invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022. The distinctive trait of this work is the diagnosis that the author conducts on three levels: the traits of Russian political history; the ascent of Putin, from a former KGB agent in Eastern Germany until his rise to the presidency of the Russian Federation in 1999; and Putin’s ideology and its development through the years. From these first elements, it seems that Colombo’s (2022) study is in line with the works of A. Graziosi, *L’Ucraina e Putin tra Storia e ideologia* (2022), A. Borrelli, *Nella Russia di Putin. La costruzione di una identità post-sovietica* (2023), and E. Kostioukovitch, *Nella mente di Vladimir Putin* (2022). Yet Colombo’s book has something more to offer. As Toni Negri writes in the Foreword, “even if it does not offer solutions, it does propose paths to follow concerning those problems that the Ukraine war has brought to our attention” (Colombo, 2022)—paths that widen in relation to the topic discussed by Colombo in the interview published in *Opinio Juris* on March 14, 2023, titled “Ukraine one year later.”

From an analysis of the topics covered by Colombo, important clues emerge regarding the debate on the polarization of the global world, divided between models that embody the spirit of liberal democracies and models that, undermining the meaning of liberal democracy itself, are best understood as illiberal democracies, defined by analysts and political scientists as *pseudodemocracies* or *democratures*² that have the character of

¹ The expression “Great Game” was used for the first time in 1827 by a British officer, Captain Arthur Conolly, to define a long series of diplomatic and military skirmishes that took place during the 19th century between the British and Russian Empires. These clashes aimed to secure control of new strategic territories traversed by major mountain ranges, such as the Kunlun, the Pamir, and the Hindu Kush, which, in the nineteenth century, divided the borders between the British Empire to the south and the Russian Empire to the north. Some scholars consider the Great Game a Victorian precursor to the Cold War. See e.g., Mayer and Brysac (1999, p. XVIII).

² The term is translated from the neologism *democratura*. The origin of the neologism can be attributed to the Uruguayan writer and political analyst Eduardo Germán María Hughes Galeano, who coined the term to describe the coexistence between democratic and authoritarian elements within a model of “restricted democracy” or “constitutional dictatorship” (Burato, 2010, p. 123). Political science uses the term democracy to indicate formally constitutional but de facto oligarchic regimes.

illiberality. The adjective *illiberal* thus takes on a political meaning, as Fareed Zakaria defined it in his 1997 article, “The Rise of Illiberal Democracy.” With the term “*illiberal*”, the author designates those countries that, despite having initiated a transition from an authoritarian regime by adopting free elections, have failed to consolidate liberal institutions (Zakaria, 1997). The *illiberal* lexeme thus carries a negative connotation that has intensified over the last twenty years due to the erosion of the liberal consensus, driven by generalized discontent that has become accentuated, especially following the 2008 economic crisis (Delfino, 2019, pp. 46–60).

In this scenario, the neologism “*democratura*” stands as a contrast to the ideological universe of liberal democracy and is reflected in the mythologized concept of sovereign democracy promoted by Vladimir Putin in Russia. This model, although it proclaims itself to be democratic, on balance, ignores the accredited teleological conception of the socio-political development of the democratic-liberal categories and dynamics; indeed, it highlights the critical issues and weaknesses of these. On this theoretical basis, the following pages aim to analyze the main characteristics of Russian sovereign democracy, highlighting that this model has led to the progressive erosion of the rule of law and the emptying of democratic institutions of any guarantee, protection, or defense of human rights in Russia.

The Programmatic Objective of Sovereign Democracy: Surkov and Dugin

Although the Western lexicon of politics, as Pier Paolo Portinaro (2021) writes, “is notoriously indebted to Greek culture for the definition of its object” (p. 27), the semantic configuration of the construct *suverennaja demokracija* is indebted to Anglo-Saxon political science. But if in the English political lexicon, *sovereign democracy* is an example of democracy that outlines the traits and descriptive-prescriptive nature of the principle of organization and legitimation of power, known as the Westminster model (Carboni, 2022), the meaning assumed by *suverennaja demokracija* indicates a centralization of power that can be interpreted as an exercise in *democratura*. Seen from this angle, the sovereign democracy established in Russia is based on two pillars. The first is of a philosophical-political nature, which can be deduced from the thought of the philosophers Ivan Aleksandrovich Il’in, Vladimir Solov’ev, and Nikolai Berdjajev (Graziani, 2022). They inspired the speeches of President Putin, especially in relation to the theoretical construction of power, strengthened by his frequent use of the neologisms

³ The neologism *narodnost’* was introduced into the Russian political language at the beginning of the 19th century. The Minister of Education, Uvanov Sergei Semyonovich, used it to strengthen the triad of orthodoxy, autocracy, and nationality. This style proved useful for controlling the press, education, and literary activities, counteracting liberal tendencies. On the notion of *narodnost’*, cf. Knight (2000, pp. 41–65).

*narodnost*³ and *emigrkul't*.⁴ These reinforce the triad autocracy-orthodoxy-nationality, the basis and foundation of Putin's ideology. The second is of a theoretical-constitutional nature, which marked those stages that, since 1993, following the military attack on the Russian Parliament by President Yeltsin and the subsequent suspension of the Constitutional Court's powers, have rendered the process of building a Russian liberal state increasingly difficult. In this way, the Russian Federation transformed itself, over the course of twenty years, into a "facade democracy" (Volpi, 2010).

It is in this framework of political variability that the model of *suverennaja demokracija* referred to by Vladislav Surkov in the speech of February 7, 2006, held at the training center of the political party Edinaja Rossiya, fits (Roccucci, 2007). The incipit of the speech, as well as its title, "Sovereignty is a Political Synonym for Competitiveness,"⁵ clarifies the programmatic objective: sovereign democracy presents itself as a competitive model vis-à-vis the liberal model of democracy. The speech is divided into two parts. In the first part, Surkov underlines the specificity of the general ideological attitudes of the "United Russia" party through an analysis of recent history, the recent past, and the present, with the aim of making predictions for the future. At the center of his argument, he places the "democratic society" defined as "super-ideological, much more ideological than totalitarian, a place in which fear replaces the idea." This expression condenses the nature of power and its conferral on the leadership that keeps the Russian people united. And it is precisely the election of President Putin that has generated, according to Surkov, a form of normalization of the country's complex situation through "the dictatorship of the law," resulting in: 1) the stabilization of policy; 2) the democratization of policy and a series of democratic actions that aim at: a) the opening of a democratic society; b) the integration of the global economy; c) the globalization of systems; d) the closure of access to modern Western technologies.

In the second part of the speech, Surkov theorizes sovereignty, supported by a poem by Joseph Aleksandrovich Brodsky that exalts Russian national sentiment. Sovereignty, says Surkov, "is not a fortress of Russia, it's not that we have lost it, sovereignty is participation, it is an open struggle, sovereignty is a political synonym of competitiveness". What exactly is meant by *sovereign democracy* Surkov does not say explicitly. He assumes this concept is a pillar of Russian common sense that invigorates the emotional

⁴ In Russian literary texts, the neologism *emigrkul't* appears alongside the neologism *zarubežnaja Rossiya* (Russia beyond the border) introduced by the economist philosopher Pëtr Bergardovič Struve in 1925. The concept of *emigrkul't* is based on the desire to preserve national-patriotic sentiment and on the refusal of any integration. On the topic, see Raeff (1990).

⁵ The text of the original speech is in Russian. An English translation was reproduced for this study. For the full speech, see Edinaya Rossiya (2006).

orientation of party supporters and provides reassurance to the people. In articulating his speech, he overturns the two democracy-sovereignty paradigms, separating them from the meanings that liberal culture has traditionally given them. In a certain sense, it immunizes them. Sovereign democracy thus becomes the engine of politics, an instrument of public participation, and presents itself as a self-regulatory and non-profit organization. *Sovereign democracy* is the natural affirmation of the principle of nationality; it is the future, the continuity, and the instrument for protecting traditional values and recovering the past. The United Russia party, therefore, has the task of intensifying activities aimed at these ends through the implementation of national projects. The party positions itself as President Putin's support.

To adequately understand this construct, however, it is necessary to examine its origins. The ideological basis is linked to a phenomenological approach that the philosopher Alexandr Geľeviĉ Dugin presents as a necessary element in the search for a vision of Russian unity, grounded in a paradigm of ideas aimed at reconstructing an Eurasian Empire dominated by Russia. This idea appears in several of his books: *Foundations of Geopolitics* (Dugin, 1997) and *The Fourth Political Theory* (Dugin, 2012). The latter work places sovereign democracy, understood by Dugin as the fourth political theory of *Eurasianism*, in open antithesis to the theories of liberalism, communism, and fascism that preceded it. In the introduction, Dugin underlines that for the realization of Eurasianism it is necessary to: 1) reconsider the political history of the last centuries from new positions beyond the structures and clichés of the old ideologies; 2) realize and become aware of the profound structure of global society that emerges before our eyes; 3) correctly decipher the paradigm of post-modernity; 4) learn not to oppose the political idea, program or strategy, but consider the objective *status quo*, the most social aspect of an apolitical and fractured post-society; 5) build an autonomous political model that offers a path and a project in the world of stalemates and dead ends, the world of the endless recycling of the same old things (post-history according to J. Baudrillard; Bertens, 2003, p. 155).

In this analytical configuration, the fourth political theory is placed as an ideology built on the gap opened by an eschatological vision of Russia, anchored in biblical and philosophical references that have ramifications within the thought of Ilyin, Solov'ev, and Berdjaev (Graziani, 2022; Valle, 2021). The fourth theory is not a dogma, it is not a complete system nor a finished project, writes Dugin; it is instead "an invitation to political creativity, a declaration of intuitions and conjectures, an analysis of new conditions and an attempt to rethink the past" (Dugin, 2012, p. 7). This theory is the basis of *suverennaja demokracija* and, as an ideology, has the characteristics of constitutionality

that preserve the nationalist and conservative matrix of the Russian people. According to Surkov, this matrix is implicitly contemplated in Article 3 of the 1993 Constitution, which states, “The holder of sovereignty and the sole source of power in the Russian Federation is its multi-ethnic people.” The people factor thus takes on a theoretical as well as a legal relevance and is categorized in the meaning of the two adjectives that occur most frequently when talking about sovereign democracy: *rossijskaja*, which indicates the identity affiliation of citizens to mother Russia (it is no coincidence that the adjective also gives its name to the newspaper *Rossijskaja Gazeta* which is the official organ of the Government of the Russian Federation), and *russskij-russkie*, which defines ethnic character traits (Biscaretti Di Ruffia & Ganino, 1996; Delfino, 2019, p. 50).

Prerogatives of Sovereign Democracy

If Dugin is a supporter of the fourth political theory, called *Eurasianism*, Surkov is the ideologist who, through *sovereign democracy*, renews the idea of Russian politics based on power, strength, and struggle. However, the ideologist does not limit himself to *describing suverennaja demokracija*, but also prescribes its task. In his 2009 article, titled “Nationalization of the Future: Paragraphs pro *sovereign democracy*,” in addition to providing a definition, he outlined its features as a specific projectual dynamic. He argues that sovereign democracy is not just the description of a model, it is above all a form of protection for the multi-ethnic Russian people who “aspire to live within communities organized on just foundations, in which the dignity of free people requires that the nation to which they belong is free in a justly organized world” (Surkov, 2009, p. 8). This statement presents a vision that considers politics not only from the formal point of view, which concerns its normative character, but also from the structural and anthropological perspectives. Surkov argues that it is within the context of political practice that the supreme power embodied by the sovereignty of the people is affirmed: sovereignty is a constitutive element of democracy responsible for satisfying the needs of the people at all levels of civil, individual, and national activity. “The idea of sovereign democracy in Russia,” writes Surkov (2009), “is consistent with the provisions of the Constitution according to which the holder of sovereignty, and the only source of power in the Russian Federation, will be its multi-ethnic people; no one can usurp power in the Russian Federation” (p. 8). In the context of this statement, Surkov (2009) gives a definition of sovereign democracy:

Sovereign democracy is a mode of the political life of society in which state authorities, their bodies, and actions are elected, formed, and directed exclusively

by the Russian nation in all its unities and diversities for the sake of the material achievement of well-being, freedom, and justice, for all citizens, social groups and peoples that constitute it. (p. 9)

Unlike the philosophical conceptions that are the basis of other models (liberalism, communism, fascism) which move from theory to support praxis, sovereign democracy, even if contrary to American political realism, can take on the traits of a “praxeology” that is, as Pier Paolo Portinaro (2023) writes, “a doctrine that interprets situations, elaborates maxims for action and formulates predictions on the basis of experience” (p. 50). The recipients of the model are clear: citizens, social groups, and different peoples who, although animated by divergent interests, become part of Russia’s geopolitical chessboard. To understand the complexity of the model, which is subject to ambiguity among Western interpreters, Surkov adopts an analytical method grounded in *praxis*. That is, he elaborates a conception of Russian politics structured around who actually practices politics.

For this reason, he underlines: 1) overcoming the literal translation of the old term autocracy (*samoderzhvie*) in modern Russian, giving it the meaning of “government of free people living in free communities”: this presupposes liberalization, internationalization, and de-monopolization of the global economy; 2) the fact that sovereign democracy is not “a homegrown enterprise” but a widespread concept recognized by practicing politicians. This is confirmed by what is happening in central Europe where the concept of pluralist democracy is distinguished from majoritarian democracy; 3) the establishment of a new form of democracy based on a bond of political and cultural influence; 4) that sovereignty, being the fullness and independence of power, is not abolished but its content changes together with the way of exercising power; 5) sovereign democracy is distinguished from other forms of democracy by its intellectual leadership, its united elite, its nationally oriented open economy and its ability to defend itself. Its priorities are a) civic solidarity; b) the synergy of the civic, creative, entrepreneurial, scientific, cultural-technological and political group; c) culture as an organism of meaning formation and intellectual influence; d) education and science as a source of competitiveness; e) intellectual mobilization for the development and promotion of each sector; 6) the ethnic factor characterized by the distinction of the Russian civic nation (*rossiiskaia*), understood as a non-linear equation of different interests, customs, language, religion, from the Russian ethnic groups (*russkie*) closely intertwined with the Russian Nation (Krastev, 2006, pp. 113–117; Surkov, 2009, pp. 15–18). In essence, sovereign democracy arises from the meeting point between the perspective of praxis and the deciphering of historical reality.

Putin's Ideology

Precisely to make the reality of sovereign democracy known empirically, Surkov published an article entitled “Dolgoe Gosudarstvo Putina” (Putin's State and the Deep People)⁶ in the newspaper *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* in February 2019. This article, unlike the one published in 2009 in the journal *Russian Studies in Philosophy*, is structured around pro-sovereign democracy sequences and paragraphs and is a clear act of loyalty and celebration of sovereign democracy as a technique of government. Sovereign democracy is defined in terms of theory and practice, in contrast to a vision of politics as an illusion. Illusion thus becomes the lexeme of conflict, of struggle against the “supreme character or trick of the Western lifestyle, in particular of Western democracy, which has long been more obedient to the ideas of Barnum than to those of Cleisthenes” (Surkov, 2019, p. 25). This statement highlights the rejection of “fatalist realism” and its historical dimension, which has led to both a lack of interest in what democracy should be and in its very existence. Faced with this drift, Russia reacted by slowing down the process of decomposition through the creation of the Russian Federation, “starting from the state of nature.”

In this way, Surkov ignores the Western philosophical tradition of natural law, which, as Cassese says, constitutes the basis and foundation of the doctrine of human rights (Cassese, 2015). It cannot be surprising, therefore, that the genesis of the Russian State, as a new orientation of Russian consciousness, of individual knowledge and conduct, and of the people, is built on the organic vision of the State and society, a vision, among other things, deduced from the political philosophy of Nikolai Berdjajev (Graziani, 2022, pp. 95–97). Putin's State, the creation of the Russian Federation of the 21st century, is, Surkov (2019) writes, the fourth organic model of State after “the State of Ivan III (Grand Duchy/Kingdom of Muscovy and All the Russias, 15th–18th centuries); the State of Peter the Great (Russian Empire, 18th-19th centuries); Lenin's State (Soviet Union, 20th century)” (p. 150). The genesis of the State is intrinsically linked to the genesis of the government, which is based on ideas and planning dimensions defined as “ideologies of the future.” Putin's ideology is the enucleable completeness of the State; it is the basis and constitutive foundation of the government. It is not founded on the style of old propaganda: it is founded on a language built on discourse and has the potential for expansion and export. According to this vision, Putin's ideology: 1) rejects any ideological borrowing from the outside; 2) rejects globalization and a horizontal world without borders; 3) protects sovereignty and national interests; 4) protects old values

⁶ Translated into Italian from the French edition by M. Eltchaninoff for the Fondation pour l'innovation politique with the title “*La longue gouvernance de Putin.*”

even in the 21st century; 5) is founded on de-globalization, re-sovereignization, and nationalism; 6) is against US hegemony which has generated forms of pervasive mass surveillance. Putin's ideology not only inaugurates a new scientific genre of ideas but also investigates the causes of past and present events, looking to the future and to a new dimension of Russian political life distant from that of the United States.

The speech in Munich on 10 February 2007, held by Putin on the occasion of the Security Conference, reopened the strategy of tension and competition between the two countries. On that occasion, Putin distanced himself from the "ideological stereotypes and double standards" of a bygone era characterized by a unipolar world. Well, the principles of political action aimed at destabilizing the West and weakening the rule of law still creep into these ideas today. To a Deep State logic, which is nothing other than the image of an "opaque political establishment", Surkov contrasts Putin's ideology, founded on: a) the idea of an honest state; b) an integrated system; c) the absence of a Deep State; d) an idea of the people, who preserve their opinions, escape polls, propaganda, the threats of other models while safeguarding their dignity.

The Russian people, although, as Surkov writes, "has been identified in the peasants, in the proletarians, in the partyless, in the hipsters", today is an anthropological constant; it is the profound people that "creates an irresistible force of cultural gravitation that unites the nation." The deep bond established between the people, society, and its leader is a distinctive feature of the new contemporary model of the Russian state, which begins "with trust and is maintained with trust" (Surkov, 2019, p. 153). This, Surkov argues, is the fundamental difference with the Western model, which cultivates an increasingly evident distrust of institutions and politics in general. The West and the political realism that distinguishes it are affected by illusions; to contain the risks of an incurable fracture, the West must undertake detailed diagnoses and propose wide-ranging strategies to avoid falling into unrealistic illusions.

Conclusions

Thanks to the analytical-reconstructive excavation work carried out immediately after the start of the "special operation" of February 24, 2022, by political scientists, analysts, and observers, today we are aware of the numerous assumptions and relevant theoretical, religious, legal, and political means which the Russian leader makes use of to propagandize his ideology inside and outside Russia with obvious lashes against the West. These are guidelines supported by a theorization that makes use of analogies that outline a new form of discrimination against the enemy: the West is to be viewed with suspicion, as Russia seeks external consensus, with the aim of generating a new form of

absolute enmity that ignores liberal paradigms by presupposing new ones, taken from the cultural and intellectual arsenal of all non-Western imperial powers. Think, for example, of the renewed friendship with China, the fascination with North Korea, and lastly, the form of hybrid friendship with Kāmenei's Iran. Therefore, if Putin's ideology, like Iranian theocratic ideology, can be defined as a real historical force, as a product of the rebirth and recovery of unity and lost order, there would still be much to say about the difficult reconciliation between the theoretical-practical assumptions which, as Luca Scuccimarra (2023) writes, "mark the evolution of Western political and legal discourse" and the theocratic and autocratic styles that govern Iran and Russia, enemies of the West with whom it is difficult to negotiate and with which, according to Cicero's famous phrase, the Treatises remain a dead letter.

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