

Democracy or Authoritarian Regime: Discussions during the Period of *perestroika* Reconsidered

Yoshikazu Suzuki

In recent years, particularly after 2004, President George W. Bush sometimes expressed concern about turning back from democracy in Russia. For example, in February 2005, just before the summit with the President of Russian Federation, he critically mentioned about centralization of the government structures, which President Vladimir Putin put into practice after the hostage crisis in the school in North Caucasus, and claimed that Russian democracy should be improved. Against this kind of statements President Putin argues, sometimes in an aggressive tone, that principles and institutions of democracy must be based on the history and traditions in Russia and only Russian people can make choice of features of their democracy. His ruling party, "United Russia" (*Edinaia Rossia*) recently presents the concept of "sovereign democracy" as their own type of democracy.

In the West not a few people may understand the situations in Russia as follows. Once Mikhail Gorbachev started *perestroika* and began democratization of politics and society, democratic movement expanded beyond the speculations of the Communist Party leaders, who consented to run the reforms only within the framework of the socialism and the single party system. Then, after conservatives have failed to seize power in a coup and the Soviet Union was demised, Boris Yeltsin and the democrats started the political democratization and the transition to market economy in new independent Russia. They struggled to realize them through a large variety of oppositions and difficulties. However, Yeltsin's successor Putin, who is based on the interests of military forces and security authorities, set out to strengthen nationalism over resources in economy and to construct authoritarian structures in politics. These interpretations provide an explanation to some aspects of the political history of Russia after the latter half of 1980s. But these are simplistic interpretations of political and social changes which came about in Russia in last 20 years.

It is certain that there are distinct differences between the slogans which Yeltsin government put up at their starting point and the courses which present Russian government is going for. However, we can provide various arguments against the interpretation that Russian democracy realized by Yeltsin has been pulled back under the Putin's government. In addition, we have to think of the fact that the Russian public opinion, which had supported democratization in Russia before, stands for the political styles and the personalities of President Putin now. It is not our purpose to criticize or to defend the Russian present government. In this article, I would like to examine how the democracy was understood in Russia during the years of *perestroika* and the last decade.

In order to do that, firstly, I try to make a survey of the political thoughts among the present Russian political leadership, and to make an analysis of public opinion, focusing on the concept of democracy. Secondly, I try to look back and to examine what problems had been discussed in the years of *perestroika*, concerning these subjects.

“Sovereign Democracy” and Public Opinion

It is Vladislav Surkov, the deputy secretary of the presidential administration of Russian Federation who has formulated the concept, “sovereign democracy.” Then it was accepted as one of the fundamental concepts for the Putin’s ruling party, “United Russia.” What “sovereign democracy” means? It contains the meanings of sovereign states in the age of globalization, security of national prestige and interests of Russia, and some other elements. But its core part is the notion that they aim for their own type of democracy, not imitating the West but relying on historical experiences in Russia. In the briefing for journalists on June 28 V. Surkov told “Our Russian model of democracy is called ‘sovereign democracy,’” and he continued, “We want to be an open nation among other open nations and cooperate with them on fair rules and not to be controlled from without.” In addition, he emphasized it would be double standard if you criticize the Russian government as exercising authoritarian control, and told “We have everything that any democratic countries have. Claims to Russia are prompted by the interests of those who have radical feelings (in terms of the understanding of democratic values), it is their right. But why only their point of view should be taken into account.”¹ V. Surkov defined the concept of “sovereign democracy” in one of his speeches as follows;²

We may determine sovereign democracy as a way of political life in which the power, its organs and activities are selected, formed and directed exclusively by the Russian nation with all their diversity and integrity for the sake of achievement of material welfare, freedom and justice by all citizens, social groups and peoples.

On the next part of his speech, expecting the criticism from liberal intellectuals about the “sovereign democracy,” he tried to respond to it. Criticism may be for that: “Democracy must be either present or absent. Any defining adjective means either authoritarian pretension or sophistic tricks.” Responding to that, he points out that the entities of democracy have been changed in history. “In many societies they regarded them as democratic, while the rights of women and racial minorities were restricted or even slaves were traded. Is such a democracy the same as that of present day? And if it isn’t, how can we do without definition? It is inevitable and necessary to shift emphasis to specific components of democratic processes in every new historical point.”

We should pay attention to the fact that such ideas as V. Surkov’s are shared by the majority of Russian citizens. A lot of data of public opinion research approve that. For example, according to the research conducted by the “Levada Center,” those who think that “Russia is the West and it must strive to come close to the countries of Europe and USA, introducing their western orders” were 12% in 2003, 9% in 2006 and 10% in 2007. At the same time those who think that “Russia is a Eurasian country that has its own way of development” were 76% in 2003, 76% in 2006 and 74% in 2007 and those who think “Russia is an ‘eastern’ country, it should look forward to cooperation with Asian neighbors” were 5%, 6%, 7% respectively.³

¹ V. Surkov, “Nasha rossiiskaia model’ demokratii nazyvaetsia ‘suverennoi demokratiei.’” 18 Nov. 2007 <<http://www.edinoros.ru/news.html?id=114108>>

² “Natsionalizatsiia budushchego: paragrafy pro suverennoiu demokratiiu ot Vladislava Surkova.” *Novyi region* 2, publikatsiia za 20.11.06, 18 Nov. 2007 <<http://www.nr2.ru/moskow/92492.html>>

³ L. A. Sedov, “Rossia i mir” 10.08.2007. <<http://www.levada.ru/press/2007081001.html>>

Let us think about the factors that developed such political and social situations. It is possible to point out three things, that is, political backwardness in Russia, the legacy of the totalitarian system and the political culture in Russia. There is some distance between the first two (backwardness and legacy) choices and the last one (political culture). The first two explanations may be based on the premise that principles and values of democracy are universal, therefore they must be accepted also in Russia, and if they are not accepted to Russian society now, some factors appear to be obstacles. Meanwhile the interpretation by political culture is based on the assumption that western principles and values are alien to Russian society and it may not be easy to accept.

Let us examine the data of public opinion a little more. On the table 1 there are responses to the question: what kind of political system seems you better? The percentage of those who choose “the democracy of the Western type” are about 20% and are falling.⁴ The percentage of those who choose “the present system” are increasing and more than 20% now. And those who choose the Soviet type are around 40%. The table 2 shows results of the survey on party systems.⁵ The second choice supports to the western-type two-party systems, and its part is about 20% and only a little more than the first choice. About 30% of respondents think that Russia needs no parties but real leaders. By the way, the table 3 and the table 5 show the understandings on democracy.⁶ It is interesting because you can find out perception gaps between generations. The first choice means the paternalistic relationship between the states and people and percentage of the respondents who choose it is more among the older generations. As to the relations with the states, you can see more clearly on the table 4.⁷ At the same time, those who choose 3rd and 5th of the table 5 are relatively more among younger generations. Political culture may change through generations.

Table 1. What kind of political system seems better for you? (N=1,600)

	1996	1997	1998	2000	2003	2004	2005	2006
The Soviet system, which we had before 1990s	34	38	43	42	48	41	42	35
The present system	18	11	5	11	18	19	23	26
Democracy of the Western type	25	28	32	26	22	24	20	16
The others	8	8	7	4	6	5	6	7
Difficult to answer	15	15	13	17	6	11	9	16

⁴ M. Ordzhonikidze, “Zapadnye tsennosti v vospriatii rossiiian,” *Vestnik obshchestvennogo mneniia. Dannye. Analiz. Diskussii*, No. 2, 2007, p. 27.

⁵ N. Zorskaia, “Dumskie vybory 1993–2003 gg. K probleme sotsial’noi tseny postsovetskogo ‘partiinogo stroitel’sstva,” *Vestnik obshchestvennogo mneniia. Dannye. Analiz. Diskussii*, No. 4, 2004, p. 23.

⁶ M. Ordzhonikidze, *op. cit.*, p. 33; Iu. Levada, “Obshchestvennoe mnenie v politichskom zazerkal’e,” *Vestnik obshchestvennogo mneniia. Dannye. Analiz. Diskussii*, No. 2, 2006, p. 16.

⁷ M. Ordzhonikidze, *op. cit.*, p. 30.

Table 2. What kind of party system seems better in Russia? (N=1,600)

	1994			1995			1999	2001
	Feb.	Apr.	Dec.	Jan.	Mar.	Jun.	Feb.	Feb.
The single party in power for all the people	16	17	18	18	18	18	18	27
Two or three well organized popular parties	23	20	21	22	20	18	26	27
Several authentic parties, though they are small, organized by people with conviction	17	14	13	13	13	12	16	15
Russia needs no parties but real leaders	29	26	29	30	30	33	28	18
Difficult to answer	15	23	20	17	19	19	12	13

Table 3. Which of the two do you think is more needed in Russia? (N=1,600)

	2001	2006
To strengthen the power	37	43
For the power to be put under the control of the society	54	42
Difficult to answer	9	15

Table 4. What is the role of the State in economy? (2006, N=1,600)

The State must provide every citizen with the enough standard of welfare	66.1
The State must help every citizen in hard condition, for example, unemployed	15.3
The State must provide only those, who cannot take care of themselves with the social protect	12.4
People must take care of themselves and secure their own living standard with no intervention by the State	2.1

Table 5. What do you think is the democracy?

(Possible to chose more than one; Feb. 2006, N=1,600)

Age	All	18-24	25-39	40-54	55-
The power which looks after people's need	24	19	21	25	28
Everyone is obliged by the power to obey law regardless of his status and property	35	34	35	42	29
The power system in which citizens can freely talk their opinions and listen to the others'	28	31	32	28	23
The power system in which the government should know and take into account people's opinions	27	27	28	27	26
The power system in which it is possible for citizens to exercise their influence on decision making	24	30	23	27	20
The others	1	-	1	1	2
Difficult to answer	9	6	9	6	14

In these contexts, we are reminded of that historical controversy between the Slavists (*slavianofily*) and the Westerners (*zapadniki*) in 19th century, in which they discussed whether Russia would develop along the same modernization processes as in Western countries, or to the different direction and on the different way. These arguments have been repeatedly discussed by now. Especially, during the de-Stalinization process in 1960s and in the years of *perestroika* this kind of controversy was revived.

Democracy and Authoritarianism

There are two reasons why we examine the arguments in the period of *perestroika*. Firstly, the problems of democracy and civil society were openly discussed among the Slavists and the Westerners then. Secondly, because the process of drastic changes in politics and economy started from the beginning of *perestroika*, we cannot identify the positions of Yeltsin's and Putin's governments in the whole processes of transformation, without reconfirming the starting point.

As to the arguments on democracy and authoritarianism over the period of *perestroika*, we recall the name of Andranik Migranyan and his point of view to the so-called "iron hands (*zheleznaia ruka*)" problem. In June 1988 Communist Party of Soviet Union (CPSU) held the 19th Party Conference, in which the problems of political reform and democratization became one of the focal points of *perestroika*. After one year, in 1989, "pluralism" in the Soviet society has already become widely discussed. Only few people did doubt that the 6th Article of the Soviet Constitutions which defined the directional role of CPSU in the Soviet Union would soon be deleted and introduction of multi party system would be close at hand. Precisely at that moment, Migranyan, one of the key players in reformist group insisted that Soviet society didn't so much need the political pluralism as the authoritarian regime with dictator in power.

In those days liberal intellectuals thought that transition to market economy and political democratization were in inseparable relations, so these two destinations had to be pursued simultaneously. But Migranyan thought differently. Let us look at his arguments in detail. In the first place, he distinguishes between totalitarian and authoritarian regimes. Whereas there are no examples of transition from totalitarian regimes to democracy by way of reforms from above, there are many cases of transition from authoritarian regimes to democratic political systems.⁸ Then he focused on the role of civil society.

Before Migranyan mentioned the "iron hands," he began to emphasize the importance of civil society and its independence from the states more than anyone. He thought that on the basis of political democracy it needed mature civil society independent from the states in any countries. In authoritarian regimes, there existed civil societies, even if their activities and functions were restricted, in some cases severely. But in the Soviet Union any autonomous social organization was destroyed and people were atomized and alienated. According to Migranyan, the Soviet society was devoid of independent civil society and political culture which would sustain the functions of

⁸ A. Migranian, "Dolgii put' k evropeiskomu domu," *Novyi mir*, No. 7. 1989, p 166.

democracy, so he was skeptical of the hasty introduction of political pluralism at that time. Soviet society had to succeed in constructing the new civil society and political culture first of all with the help of “iron hands” and after that they could have a view of the plural democratic system in the future.⁹

It is impossible to transit from “ideal” totalitarian system to democracy instantaneously and as gallop....

While going on the most complex processes to build, design and strengthen the civil society in the economic and spiritual areas, it is extremely important in political arena to keep strong authoritarian power, which would allow the limited democracy in this phase.¹⁰

I would like to point out that during the period of *perestroika* a part of the western-oriented reformists group tried to avoid uncritical and automatic recipients of political and economic systems of Western type, having a notion of negative aspects and contradictions in those systems. As they were well aware of not only particular historical features of the Soviet society, and also the postmodern stream of thoughts in the West, they got close to the Slavist. Some of the group, like Migranyan, thought that it was possible and necessary to make use of the “iron hand” in order to construct the civil society, although there were possibilities for their arguments to be used by authoritarians. They were not the Slavists but the Westerners at the root but at the same time they are different from liberal elites in the Yeltsin era.

Now there remains something worth noting among their discussions in those years.

* This paper was presented at an international workshop in Barcelona, Kingdom of Spain on November 20, 2007.

(Yoshikazu Suzuki, Tokyo University of Foreign Studies)

⁹ A. Migranian, “Vzaimootnosheniia individa, obshchestva i gosudarstva v politicheskoi teorii marksizma i problemy demokratizatsii sotsialisticheskogo obshchestva,” *Voprosy filosofii*, No. 8, 1987, p. 70.

¹⁰ A. Migranian, “Dolgi put’ k evropeiskomu domu,” p. 169.