The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Rise and Fall of Surkov's Sovereign Democracy

By Vladimir Frolov

May 12, 2013



In early 2005, Gleb Pavlovsky, the Kremlin's top spin doctor at the time, spoke to a small group of political junkies. Standing in for then-presidential deputy chief of staff Vladislav Surkov, he tried to explain the Kremlin's new strategy to restrict registration for new political parties, introduce party list parliamentary elections and abolish direct elections of governors. The rationale for these measures, he said, was to "block an idiot's path to power."

Surkov sought to build a political system with one dominant party, United Russia, and a few smaller parties that would be presented as opposition to United Russia without challenging the Kremlin's hold on power.

This was not without precedent in democratic nations. In post-war Sweden and Japan, such systems functioned over several decades. They evolved gradually, and the dominant parties were genuine political forces with distinct ideologies and significant pluralities of views within their ranks. Most important, they relied on free elections and electoral rules equal

for all players fairly enforced by independent courts.

Surkov thought he could hasten the birth of a new political system by manipulating the electoral rules, slanting media coverage and marshaling financial resources in favor of the dominant party. He tried to usher in a two-party system by setting up a fake second party of power.

He ended up building a political contraption based on imitation, cynicism, slanderous propaganda and outright electoral fraud. It is driven by fake parties and ghost nongovernmental organizations dependent on government money. Worst of all, it is recruiting crazies and cynical demagogues to join its ranks.

Now Surkov says the system is adapting to new demands, like allowing free registration of new parties. He still thinks the Kremlin needs to help build a strong opposition party to compete with United Russia. But he is grossly misreading the public mood.

Russians have zero tolerance for fakes or for more imitational opposition parties. They demand government accountability through honest elections free of voter fraud and media manipulation. They want transparent rules for ballot access, a level playing ground for campaign financing and courts that take independent decisions on election disputes.

The system Surkov engineered pretends this new agenda does not exist. Based on cynicism and manipulation, it eschews demands for honesty and sincerity. It cannot evolve and can only be scrapped. Surkov's system is devouring its puppet master.

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Original url:
https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2013/05/12/rise-and-fall-of-surkovs-sovereign-democracy-a23891