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Russia's Dual State

Felix Hett

The crisis of Russian democracy: the dual state, factionalism, and the Medvedev succession / Richard Sakwa. - Cambridge [etc.] : Cambridge University Press, 2011. - xviii, 398 p. - ISBN 978-0-521-76842-9 ; 978-0-521-14522-0 (pbk)

The eagle in Russia's coat of arms has two heads and, on and off since its first sighting in the Middle Ages, scholars have been tempted to identify it with dualisms in Russian politics and society. Richard Sakwa, known to be a meticulous observer of both, does so again in his new book, albeit in an innovative way.

Sakwa sees a "dual state" at work in contemporary Russia. Its political system can be characterised neither as democracy nor as autocracy "with adjectives". Instead, Sakwa identifies two competing sub-systems, which he calls the "constitutional state" and the "administrative regime". With the former, he draws attention to the fact that Russia's democratic constitution of 1993 is formally observed in most cases, that institutions based on it are working and take part in shaping the outcomes of the political process. The constitutional state is, however, undermined by the administrative regime, a term Sakwa uses to describe the "shadow politics" of

"fighting below the carpet" between different factions in the Kremlin, the corruption and arbitrariness of Russia's bureaucracy as well as the close relationship between business and *vlast*' (power) within its "genuinely political economy" (131).

Thus, "public politics", dominant in Western democracies, can be found in Russia as well, most prominently in the form of political parties that at least seem to compete for seats in legislatures. One reason for this is that, lacking a unifying ideology, the elites are to a certain extent dependent upon the legitimacy deriving from the constitution and the elections stipulated by it. Decisions are, however, seldom reached in parliament, but at the "subterranean" level, usually invisible to the ordinary citizen. Here, various politico-bureaucratic interest groups compete for influence and their share of the rents available in resource-rich Russia. Sakwa's starting point of analysis is that these factional conflicts tend to become visible at times of succession. The transfer of power from one president to another always forms a potentially critical juncture in the development of the political regime, as the ever-fragile balance between various factions could easily tilt if a candidate not suitable to all power groups were selected.

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Sakwa takes the transition from Vladimir Putin to Dmitry Medvedev as a showcase example to prove his point. Based on a wealth of both English and Russian literature, the factional infighting from 2005 onwards, as well as the Duma and presidential elections of 2007 and 2008 respectively are analysed in detail. Convincingly, Sakwa shows how Putin, constrained by the constitution he swore to respect, refrained from seeking a third term in office. In the outcome, however, he retained substantial powers by becoming prime minister not under, but alongside the new President Medvedev. Sakwa explains the specific nature of this succession with the functional need to retain the balance between the competing elite factions, a role fulfilled by Putin as president in such a way that no successor was trusted to replace him without endangering the highly valued “stability” at the top of the Russian state. Thus, Putin, regardless of his own personal ambitions, was pushed to stay at the helm by elites fearing for their own positions. Still, the political regime that emerged after the “operation succession” underwent a slight, yet notable transformation.

The constitutional state, limiting the president to a maximum of two consecutive terms in office, in the event counterbalanced the administrative regime. This leads to Sakwa’s central argument, namely that both sub-systems are in rough balance: the remnants of Russian constitutionalism prevent the regime from sliding “into outright despotism” (357), whereas the

non-transparent and para-constitutional political practices erode the democratic institutions. The future of Russia’s political system thus remains open. Autocracy as well as democracy are possible. This dynamism is the strength of Sakwa’s analytical model, which is able to adequately identify the many shades of grey in a subject area that is too often painted in black and white.

An occasional lack of concision is the book’s weakness: not all information presented is relevant to advancing the argument. Speculations on the personal considerations of Vladimir Putin may be plausible, but are methodologically questionable. Finally, the problem of covering processes that essentially take place within a “black box”, like the factional infighting, should have been discussed in more detail, as this poses the greatest challenge to all future scholars of the administrative regime.

Despite these minor flaws, *The Crisis of Russian Democracy* is a highly recommendable book, especially because the next “operation succession” is currently underway. Sakwa provides an analytical framework which is very useful for understanding current affairs in Russia. It also serves as a good guideline for evaluating Dmitry Medvedev’s first presidential term. Most likely, Sakwa’s conclusion that the fundamental challenge for Russian politics is “to reduce the arbitrariness of the administrative regime while enhancing the hegemony of the normative state” (353) will remain valid for the foreseeable future.