



# DISPUTED DEMOCRACY: THE INSTRUMENTALISATION OF THE CONCEPT OF DEMOCRACY IN US-RUSSIA RELATIONS DURING THE GEORGE W. BUSH AND PUTIN PRESIDENCIES

## Democracia reñida: la instrumentalización del concepto de democracia en las relaciones entre los Estados Unidos y Rusia a lo largo de los mandatos presidenciales de George W. Bush y Putin

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Abstract

The conflict over the idea of democracy was a key factor in the deterioration of US-Russia bilateral relations during the second term of the George W. Bush presidency (2005-2009). US governmental and non-governmental support for democratisation in the post-Soviet region was viewed by Russia as a cover for the advancement of US national interests in the region, at the expense of those of Russia. In response, Russia developed practical and discursive strategies to counter it. Debates about the status of Russian democracy, about the idea of “sovereign democracy”, and of the democratic (or otherwise) conduct of US foreign affairs, all emerged in this period as sites – and evidence – of dispute between the two states. This article argues that pro-active US democracy promotion rhetoric combined with a clear pattern of instrumentalisation of the concept of democracy encouraged – in the contexts of a more broadly assertive US foreign policy and the “Colour Revolutions” – an answering instrumentalisation of the idea and use of “democracy” by Russian political elites, who utilised the concept as the basis for a discursive challenge to the US’s global dominance. In consequence, not only is the content of the term “democracy” a source of dispute but, critically, that dispute became tied to questions of state identity, state security, and conceptions of international relations. “Democracy” is thus likely to remain both a source of, and a means of articulating, discontent in the US’s relationship with Russia and the states of Central Asia for the foreseeable future.

Democracy, Russia, United States, George W. Bush, Colour Revolutions, identity, security  
*Democracia, Rusia, Estados Unidos, George W. Bush, Revoluciones de Colores, identidad, seguridad*



Key words

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Fechas

*El conflicto sobre la idea de democracia fue un factor clave en el deterioro de las relaciones bilaterales entre los Estados Unidos y Rusia a lo largo de la segunda etapa del mandato presidencial de George W. Bush (2005-2009). El apoyo gubernamental y no gubernamental estadounidense a la democratización de la región postsoviética fue visto por Rusia como un encubrimiento de los avances de los intereses nacionales estadounidenses en la zona, a expensas de los de Rusia. Como respuesta Rusia desarrolló estrategias prácticas y discursivas para contrarrestarlos. Los debates sobre el estado de la democracia Rusa, sobre la idea de «democracia soberana» y sobre la guía democrática (u otra) de las relaciones exteriores de los Estados Unidos emergieron durante esta etapa como lugares –y evidencia– de las disputas entre ambos estados. Este artículo sostiene que la retórica de fomento de la democracia estadounidense combinada con un patrón claro de instrumentalización del concepto de democracia que alentó –en los contextos de una más general política exterior asertiva estadounidense y de las «revoluciones de colores»– la respuesta de la instrumentalización de la idea y uso de «democracia» por las élites políticas rusas, que emplearon el concepto como la base de un reto discursivo al dominio global estadounidense. Como consecuencia, no solo es el contenido del término «democracia» motivo de discusión sino que, de modo crítico, la disputa ha quedado unida a temas como la identidad estatal, la seguridad estatal y conceptos de relaciones internacionales. «Democracia», por lo tanto, parece que se mantendrá como una fuente y como un medio de articular el descontento en la relación de los Estados Unidos con Rusia y los estados de Asia Central en un futuro previsible.*



The deterioration in the US-Russia bilateral relationship since the start of the Ukrainian crisis in late 2013 has brought relations between the two states to arguably their lowest point in the post-Soviet period. A central factor in this deterioration has been the perception on the part of key members of the Russian political elite that the events in Ukraine were part of a wider attempt by the US and its allies to undermine Russia's interests and international position.<sup>1</sup> In the case of Ukraine, as in other cases, Russian interests are characterised not only as material but also ideational – the widening and deepening dispute with the US and its allies is understood to comprise questions of identity and political values which are simultaneously stakes in the conflict and instruments to be used in it.

To understand the way in which contested political values have developed as critical factors in US-Russia relations, it is necessary to consider the ways in which they became central to the relationship during the first decade of the twenty-first century. The most important ideational dispute in this period was that over democracy – its meaning and its promotion. The conflict over the idea of democracy during the second term of the George W. Bush presidency (2005-2009) was a key factor in the deterioration of US-Russia bilateral relations, reversing the improvement in relations that had occurred at the start of the Bush presidency, and re-emerging as a source of friction after the end of the “reset” period during the first Obama administration. US governmental and non-governmental support for democratisation in the post-Soviet region was viewed by Russia as a cover for the advancement of US national interests in the region, at the expense of those of Russia. In response, Russia developed practical and discursive strategies

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, the assertion of Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov that the EU's Association Agreement with Ukraine was promoted by European states closely allied to the US as part of a policy of dividing Russia and the rest of Europe in order to undermine Russian strategic interests (Lavrov, 2014).

to counter it.<sup>2</sup> Debates about the status of Russian democracy, about the idea of “sovereign democracy”, and of the democratic (or otherwise) conduct of US foreign affairs, all emerged in this period as sites – and evidence – of dispute between the two states.

This has been interpreted by many British and American analysts as a cynical manoeuvre, designed to check democracy promotion within Russia and the surrounding states of the CIS (Ambrosio, 2009; Fawn, 2009), or as part of a strategy to counter emergent, domestic democracy movements (Horvath, 2011). This instrumentalisation of democracy by Russian political elites also needs, however, to be understood in context; one context which has been largely neglected but is, I would suggest, important is the instrumentalisation of the term, and of the policy of, democracy promotion, by the Bush administration. The growing US criticism of Russian democratic failures took place in a broader context of what appeared to be a highly partial approach to democracy and its promotion across the space of the former Soviet Union and beyond. This article argues that the combination of pro-active US democracy promotion rhetoric combined with evidence of the instrumentalisation of the concept of democracy encouraged, in the contexts of a more broadly assertive US foreign policy and the Colour Revolutions, an answering instrumentalisation of the idea and use of “democracy” by Russian political elites, who utilised the concept as the basis for a discursive challenge to the US’s global dominance. As a result, the dispute over democracy became tied to questions of state identity and security, and to perceptions of international order, with consequences for the bilateral relationship and beyond it.

## 1. The idea of democracy in the foreign policy of the George W. Bush administration

A commitment to democracy promotion was a prominent element of US foreign and security policy during the Bush administration, as it has been of administrations before and since (Monten, 2005; Rieffer & Mercer, 2005; Smith, 2012; Bouchet, 2013). “Democracy” as a core US foreign policy value, and “democracy promotion” as a key objective together formed a central pillar of the Bush administration’s foreign policy, despite an initial reluctance of the administration to involve itself in “nation building”. The use of these terms and their application to the practices of foreign policy profoundly shaped relations (in both positive and negative ways) with the states of the former Soviet Union in this period, most significantly with Russia; in particular, the perception that the terms were selectively applied and instrumentalised for the purposes of advancing US geopolitical interests at the expense of Russia shaped the discursive response of the Russian government to the US’s engagement in the region.

“Democracy” – and “freedom”, a term with which it was frequently paired – recurred as a key trope of Bush administration speeches, briefings, and policy documents after 11 September 2001 (“9/11”). The main subjects of the Bush administration’s democracy promotion policy were Iraq and Afghanistan; its discursive scope extended well beyond these two states, however, to form a central principle of the administration’s wider foreign policy as part of its “Freedom Agenda”. However, US democracy promotion policy during the George W. Bush presidency was deeply contentious in a number of respects. Most obviously, the two principal areas of focus,

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2 The term “post-Soviet” is used here not to indicate an authoritarian regime type as in, for example, Fawn (2009), but to refer to any successor state of the USSR.

Afghanistan and Iraq, were states where democracy promotion accompanied – indeed, was made possible by – US-led military intervention to remove the existing government. Militarised, coercive democracy promotion in these two cases was understood to have increased resistance to democracy promotion efforts elsewhere (Carothers, 2006).

A second problem was that the Bush administration appeared to combine an inconsistent attitude to democracy promotion in different states with a notably activist approach – engaging more assertively with the idea of democracy promotion in non-allied states than immediately prior administrations had done while minimising criticism of democratic and human rights failings on the part of allies, and in consequence producing an appearance of greater partiality on the issue of states' democratic credentials. By the middle of the first decade of the twenty-first century, the Bush administration discourse on democracy and human rights appeared to act as a reward and penalty system for allies and non-allies in the “War on Terror”. As Stephen Sestanovich suggested, “Bush made it all too easy to portray his ‘freedom agenda’ as a hypocritical tool for advancing narrow US interests” (Sestanovich, 2008, p. 22); Thomas Carothers, one of the most prominent US analysts of democracy promotion, similarly warned of the risks of “the instrumentalisation of pro-democracy policies – wrapping security goals in the language of democracy promotion and then confusing democracy promotion with the search for particular political outcomes” (Carothers, 2004, p. 71).

Apart from those states where the US has been directly engaged through military intervention, arguably no other area of the world was the subject of such a high profile and sustained focus on democratisation and democracy promotion at the start of the twenty-first century as the states of the former Soviet Union. The reasons for this were complex; Beissinger (2007) identifies a combination of opportunity; prior history and national interests. The personal backgrounds of some of those in relevant parts of the Bush administration might be added to this list – both Condoleezza Rice and Undersecretary of State for Democracy and Global Affairs, Paula Dobriansky, for example, had previous experience as policy advisers and analysts of the region. Perhaps for precisely some of the same reasons, a high level of engagement with democracy promotion in this region was particularly contentious. The administration's approach to this region appeared to combine all of the most problematic aspects of their policy, resulting in an activist but clearly partial approach that minimised failures of democratisation in allied states while stressing them in states with which the US did not have good relations. Examples of this could be seen in the varying characterisations of two of the region's most authoritarian regimes, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan.

In the post-9/11 period, Uzbekistan was regarded as a key, regional ally in the “Global War on Terror” (GWO, a fact that placed the US government's commitment to democracy promotion in clear conflict with its security objectives. While never wholly dismissing the problems of democracy and human rights in Uzbekistan, public criticism of the Uzbek government's record was greatly moderated in this period. Thus, when challenged about the extent to which the US pursued the need for democratisation with the Uzbek government, a State Department spokesman gave a typically mild response, noting that “then-Defence Secretary Rumsfeld has affirmed [...] the need for *additional* progress on achieving multiparty democracy” [my emphasis] (State Department, 2004). In a 2003 report on human rights and democracy, the State Department claimed that “US advocacy resulted in a number of positive steps by the government of Uzbekistan, as well as some improvement in the human rights situation” (State Department, 2003, p. 126). Even when withholding some bilateral funding on the grounds that Uzbekistan had

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not made sufficient progress on democracy and human rights issues, as required by the Foreign Operations Appropriations Act, the State Department clearly sought to moderate the effect of this cut, asserting that: “Uzbekistan has made some encouraging progress over the past year with respect to human rights” (State Department, 2004b). Though eventually criticised by the administration, in the period immediately after the mass killing of demonstrators in Andijan in May 2005, it failed to condemn the government of Uzbekistan for the deaths and attempted to blame the protestors who were killed, characterising them as “criminals” and “terrorists”; this was attributed, at least by some members of the US press, to the US’s security relationship with Uzbekistan.<sup>3</sup>

From 2006, however, following the expulsion of the US from the K2 base in late 2005, the account of Uzbekistan’s democracy and human rights record became much more critical, with the State Department citing “relentless government pressure” opposing US support for Uzbek civil society development (State Department, 2007). In 2006, Uzbekistan was, for the first time, included on the State Department’s Countries of Particular Concern (CPC) list, which identified states engaged in violations of religious freedom; Uzbekistan was singled out for its “abysmal record on religious freedom and other human rights” (Terhune, 2006).

A similar trend, though in reverse, was observable in the case of Kazakhstan – a state with whom the US sought to develop closer ties, in particular following the deterioration of relations with Uzbekistan. Thus, in 2002, the State Department described itself as “deeply concerned” by “effort[s] to intimidate political opposition” and “urge[d] Kazakhstan’s political leadership to take appropriate action to protect and advance democratic development” (State Department, 2002). In December 2005, however, the State Department’s comments on Kazakhstan’s presidential elections noted that they “showed improvements over previous ones” and “reflected the will of Kazakhstan’s voters” (State Department, 2005b); in contrast, Freedom House – which continued to award Kazakhstan the second lowest political freedom ranking – noted the increased harassment of, and the introduction of legislation restricting, opposition groups, civil society, and the media, during and before the election (Freedom House, 2005). The response of the US government to these elections was later attacked in congressional testimony by Thomas Carothers as “a weak [...] response to manipulated elections” (Carothers, 2006). By September 2006, the White House was characterising Kazakhstan as “an important strategic partner in Central Asia”, and describing the US and Kazakhstan as sharing a “common commitment to working together to advance freedom and security” (State Department, 2006b). Strikingly, as Angela Stent observes, Dick Cheney’s May 2006 speech in Vilnius, attacking the Russian government’s anti-democratic behaviour, was immediately followed by a visit to Kazakhstan in which he recalled that he had “previously expressed my admiration for what has transpired here in Kazakhstan, both in terms of economic development as well as political development” (Stent, 2014, p. 140).

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3 See, for example, exchanges between the press and administration officials in May 2005 (State Department, 2005a; White House, 2005b). The link between the US-Uzbek relationship and the US response to the Andijan killings was also raised with Bush himself by one journalist who queried:

The consistency of a US foreign policy that’s built on the foundation of spreading democracy and ending tyranny [...] how come you have not spoken out about the violent crackdown in Uzbekistan, which is a US ally in the war on terror? (White House, 2005c)

## 1.1. US democracy promotion and Russia

If the relationship between the Bush and Putin administrations on questions of democracy and its instrumentalisation were generally shaped by a global US approach that combined assertive discourse on democracy in principle with a pragmatic approach to democratic failings by GWOT allies, it was also affected by two related issues of immediate concern in the region: US views of Russian democratic failings, and the impact of the Colour Revolutions. Both of these, in the Russian government's view, were evidence of the instrumental use of democracy promotion as a means to advance US national interests at the expense of Russia.

The Colour Revolutions, particularly those in Georgia (2003) and Ukraine (2004/5) were critical to the development of both US and Russian governmental attitudes towards democracy promotion in the post-Soviet space. Although the Colour Revolutions were domestic in character, involving mass protests in response to fraudulent elections, protesters in Georgia and Ukraine received significant and visible external support. This support came both from other civil society groups in states where protests had previously been successful in effecting a change of government – from Serbia in the case of Georgia, and from Serbia and Georgia in the case of Ukraine – and from Western organisations such as Freedom House, the National Democratic Institute and the Soros-funded Open Society Foundation (McFaul, 2010, Welt, 2010). Key to perceptions about the role of these external actors in the Colour Revolutions was the question of whether they were supported or even controlled by the US government, as part of a US plot to remove unfriendly regimes and undermine Russian influence. However, as Mitchell (2012, p. 75) notes, the rejection by the Bush administration of claims that the Colour Revolutions were orchestrated by Washington was complicated by the administration's desire to present them as successes of the "Freedom Agenda"; thus, for example, the events in Georgia, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan were listed in a document detailing "President Bush's Accomplishments" (White House, 2005d). The fact that the new governments in Georgia and Ukraine states sought closer relations with the US and Western institutions, and in particular that they sought NATO membership, strongly supported by the US government, reinforced perceptions that the Colour Revolutions were orchestrated by the US to advance US influence in the region, rather than democracy.

A second area in which US governmental discourse on democracy appeared to be instrumentalised was the position on the democratic status of Russia itself. In late 2001, US governmental attitudes towards Russia were at their most positive, following the Russian government's support for the Bush administration's "Global War on Terror", including a lack of opposition to the establishment of US military bases in Central Asia. The US administration's stated views of Russia's domestic politics in this period were not only broadly positive but suggested ideational commonalities between the two states; a November 2001 joint statement by Bush and Putin, for example, asserted that "our countries are embarked on a new relationship for the 21st century, founded on a commitment to the values of democracy, the free market, and the rule of law" (White House, 2001). In May 2002, Bush asserted in a radio address that "the partnership of America and Russia will continue to grow, based on the foundation of freedom and the [...] democratic values we hold dear" (White House, 2002); the following year he claimed that he "respect[ed] President Putin's vision for Russia: a country at peace within its borders, with its neighbours, and with the world, a country in which democracy and freedom and rule of law thrive" (White House, 2003). In this period, as in the previous year, Freedom House assessed

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Russia as only “partly free” and scored Russia 5 on a descending scale of 1 to 7 for both political rights and civil liberties, with a downward trend indicated for 2003 (Freedom House, 2003).

However, strongly-worded public criticism of the status of democracy in Russia became a consistent feature of the Bush administration’s foreign policy pronouncements after this, particularly in the second term of the Bush presidency (2005-09). US-Russian relations experienced a sharp deterioration in this period triggered, in part, by US engagement with, and Russian concerns about, the Colour Revolutions which had in turn prompted moves towards more authoritarian actions by the Putin administration (Stoner-Weiss, 2010, Duncan, 2013). In this period, Russia’s own democratic failings, and its opposition to democracy promotion in the other post-Soviet states, became one of the primary grounds of criticism by the US government, as was strikingly evident from Dick Cheney’s May 2006 speech in Vilnius in which he asserted that “the [Russian] government has unfairly and improperly restricted the rights of her people” and had “interfere[d] with democratic movements” in neighbouring states (White House, 2006). Following the Russia-Georgia war in August 2008, then the low point of Russia-US relations in the post-Cold War period, President Bush asserted that “Russia has tended to view the expansion of freedom and democracy as a threat to its interests” (White House, 2008), a striking contrast, as a comment about trends in Russian governmental attitudes, with the claims of shared democratic values made earlier in his presidency.

Thus, in the course of the post-9/11 Bush presidency, US governmental attitudes towards the issue of Russian democracy underwent a radical shift as wider relations between the two states deteriorated. From a moment of attempted ideational identification, when Presidents Bush and Putin asserted their common commitment to democracy, the US administration’s judgement of the failures of Russian democracy became both more explicit and more severe. While it is clear that US governmental criticisms reflected a move towards greater authoritarianism in Russia, it is also clear that it was consistent with the broader practice of the Bush administration in instrumentalising democracy discourse in the region, as elsewhere. As in the case of Uzbekistan, prior assertions of a degree of normative convergence on democracy and human rights, seemingly used to reward support in the “Global War on Terror”, was reversed once the bilateral relationship had deteriorated. In the case of Russia, this produced an answering instrumentalisation of democracy discourse, at both domestic and international levels.

## 2. The Russian response

In response to the apparent use of democracy discourse to reward and punish other states and to advance US national interests at the expense of Russia, Russian governmental counter-discourses emerged on democracy, at both domestic and international levels, with the development of “Sovereign Democracy” and “democracy with national characteristics”, and the call for a democratisation of the international system to counter US hegemony.

### 2.1. Sovereign Democracy

Sovereign Democracy emerged as a prominent concept in Russian political thinking in the middle of the first decade of the twenty first century, (Ryzhkov, 2005; Orlov, 2006; Lebedev, 2007; Averre, 2007; Evans, 2008). Vladislav Surkov, the Putin administration’s then-chief ideologist, brought the concept to public attention in a February 2005 speech to United Russia acti-

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vists. It was not universally welcomed even within the administration, with then-First Deputy Prime Minister Dmitri Medvedev stating that he preferred to discuss democracy without adjectives (Russia Profile, 2006). Nevertheless, the concept proved influential; Surkov, and others, developed it in articles, speeches, and interviews in the months following its introduction, and it ultimately established itself as a core political concept for United Russia, and the Russian government, even when the term itself was not explicitly invoked. Importantly, as Averre noted, “the ideas underpinning the concept of ‘sovereign democracy’ have taken root in mainstream foreign policy narrative” (Averre, 2007, p. 181).

Despite this, however, the concept of Sovereign Democracy remained ill-defined in relation to the democratic practices of Russian domestic politics. Although Sovereign Democracy was described by its proponents as, variously, a mechanism for the development of the Russian economy, the expression of the national will of the Russian people, and the strengthening of Russian state sovereignty, the actual detail of the democratic processes involved in sovereign democracy remained extremely limited.<sup>4</sup> It was, however, a concept that was understood to rest on an assumption of a powerful, centralised state, and of the leading role of structures of state power in key sectors of the economy. In this sense, it has been understood by analysts as a development related to, and building on, the prior concept of “managed democracy” (Okara, 2007; Petrov, 2005).

In the same period, although without using the term Sovereign Democracy, Putin developed two additional qualifications to the concept of democracy: the idea of democracy with national characteristics, and the importance of strong, sovereign statehood as a necessary pre-condition for democratic development. Speaking in February 2005, at a meeting with George W. Bush, Putin stated that:

We are not going to make up, to invent any kind of special Russian democracy [...] But, of course, all the modern institutions of democracy, the principles of democracy should be adequate to the current status of the development of Russia, to our history and our traditions. [...] The implementation of the principles and norms of democracy should not be accompanied by the collapse of the state and the impoverishment of the people. (White House, 2005a)

Two months later, in his April 2005 address to the Federal Assembly, Putin asserted that “developing democratic procedures should not come at the cost of law and order”, and that:

The democratic road we have chosen is independent in nature [... Russia] will decide itself how best to ensure that the principles of freedom and democracy are realised here, taking into account our historical, geopolitical and other particularities and respecting all fundamental democratic norms. As a sovereign nation, Russia can and will decide for itself the timeframe and conditions for its progress along this road. (Putin, 2005)

The idea of a model of democracy specific to Russia was also articulated by Sergei Ivanov in his discussion of Sovereign Democracy as one of a triad of Russian national interests. Ivanov argued against a standardised, externally determined model of democracy, asserting that all democratic states “have their national particularities, dependent on their individual, historical experience and cultural heritage” (Ivanov, 2006). In this context, he identified one of the key

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<sup>4</sup> On sovereign democracy’s conceptualisation of the relationship of the state to civil society, see Richter, 2009.



features of democracy as the right of a sovereign people to take independent decisions without external pressure.

As Ivanov's comments suggest, and as Sovereign Democracy's limited focus on specific democratic structures and practices, and the timing of its emergence all indicate, the concept needs to be understood principally as a response to external events, external (above all, US) attitudes to Russia, and Russia's consequent assertion of its rights as an independent state. Most immediately, the concept of Sovereign Democracy is widely understood to have been a direct response to the Colour Revolution phenomenon (for example, Ambrosio, 2009, p. 72; Duncan, 2013, p. 4), in particular to Ukraine's Orange Revolution, which preceded the first articulation of Sovereign Democracy by only two months. A US democracy promotion policy that was both highly partial and activist appeared to the Russian political elite and many analysts to be little more than a cover under which to advance US national interests (Sestanovich, 2008, Aksenyonok, 2008). As such, it represented a significant threat that needed to be countered conceptually as well as materially. In an article on Sovereign Democracy, Dmitri Orlov asserted that the entire Russian political establishment was agreed on the unacceptability of any attempt to overturn the principle of non-intervention in the internal affairs of states, even under the pretext of democracy "promotion" (Orlov, 2006). Writing in 2006, Surkov asserted that:

Our Russian model of democracy is called "sovereign democracy". We want to be an open nation amongst other open nations and to collaborate with them along equitable principles, and not to be controlled from the outside. [...] Managed democracy [is] the imposition by certain centres of global influence of a standardised model of ineffective and externally managed economic and political regimes [...] I will not name the countries, which, in our judgement, appear to be managed democracies, they are well known to you. (Kommersant, 2006)

The central aspect of Russian democracy, in this account, was thus not the particular features of democratic structures and practice, but its national specificities and the domestic foundations of the process of democratisation. Even where the term Sovereign Democracy was not used, as in Putin's comments, the sovereignty of the Russian state in relation to external influences was clearly critical to this conceptualisation.

That Sovereign Democracy represented an explicit response to such forces was made equally clear by Sergei Ivanov (2006), who identified it as a means of defending Russia from external pressure. In his view, accusations of democratic deficit directed towards Russia result from concerns about the emergence of an "independent, powerful, confident Russia" with a developing economy and a distinct political position which is "able to stand its ground in the global competitive struggle and defend its sovereign path of development". As Dmitri Trenin notes, the Russian government's conception of Sovereign Democracy was based primarily on Russian independence in international relations, with "democracy" here meaning "the rejection of outside interference in the Russian transformation" (Trenin, 2008, p. 121), and as Averre and Ambrosio note, sometimes characterised as a response to US neocolonialism, where democracy promotion is used as a mechanism to undermine states' independence (Averre, 2007, p. 180; Ambrosio, 2009, pp. 78-82). The concept of democracy and the process of democratisation have thus been instrumentalised, as a means of addressing a perceived threat to Russian sovereignty from external forces – a threat which emanates from the instrumentalisation of the same term by those external forces.

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## 2.2. Democratising the international system

In the context of his discussion of sovereign democracy, Sergei Ivanov (2006) attacked as “intolerable” a world order in which one power attempts to dominate, and when the rules of game, founded on military and economic superiority, are forced upon everyone else. As Ivanov’s comments suggest, the second way in which the instrumentalisation of democracy discourse was adapted by Russia and other post-Soviet states during the Bush presidency was as a means of directly attacking the idea of US hegemony. In this context, the idea of democracy is applied not to domestic political structures and processes, but to the structures and processes of international relations. Unipolarity is rejected as dangerous for international security and as inequitable; a democratisation of international relations is proposed as a safer and more just model. Criticism of anti-democratic practices are turned back on the US, which is identified as an authoritarian international actor, in contrast to Russia and other advocates of democratic international relations.

One of the most famous statements of this position was Putin’s speech to the 2007 Munich Conference, where he asked:

What is a unipolar world? [...] It is a world in which there is only one master, one sovereign [...] And this certainly has nothing in common with democracy. Because, as you know, democracy is the power of the majority in light of the interests and opinions of the minority. Incidentally, Russia, we are constantly being taught about democracy. But for some reason those who teach us do not want to learn themselves. (Putin, 2007)

The idea that a process of democratisation of international relations was required to counter anti-democratic hegemony was also raised in Dmitri Medvedev’s address to the Russian Federal Assembly in November 2008, when he stated that “the creation of a polycentric international system is more relevant than ever. [...] Together with all interested parties, we will create a truly democratic model of international relations, not allowing any one country to dominate in any sphere” (Medvedev, 2008). For the Russian government, Sovereign Democracy (whether explicitly invoked or not) was key to this conceptualisation because, as Andrei Kokoshin argued, “the presence of sovereign democracy in Russia (just as in many other countries) is an important prerequisite for democracy in interstate relations” (Kokoshin, 2006).

This use of democracy discourse at an international level to defend Russia’s position and criticise US dominance was formalised in the 2008 Russian Foreign Policy Concept, which repeatedly emphasised both the need to ensure that Russia is recognised as a democracy, and the need for a democratic international politics. It identified, as one of its main foreign policy objectives, the need for “the establishment of a just and democratic world order [...] to promote an objective global perception of the Russian Federation as a democratic state with a socially oriented market economy and an independent foreign policy” (Russian Foreign Ministry, 2008). In its discussion of contemporary international politics, and Russia’s place in it, it asserted that “for the first time in recent history, global competition is acquiring a civilisational dimension which presupposes competition between different value orientations and development models *within* [emphasis added] the framework of the universal principles of democracy and market economy”. In this context, it described “the policy of ‘containing’ Russia” as a reaction by the West to its prospective loss of global primacy. Asserting Russia’s commitment to “universal democratic values”, it identified one of Russia’s foreign policy objectives as using opportunities at regional level to promote human rights and freedoms while “respecting the national and historic particularities of each state in the process of democratic transformation without foisting

*Sergei Ivanov attacked as “intolerable” a world order in which one power attempts to dominate*

borrowed value systems onto anybody”. In relation to Russia’s policy towards Europe, it asserted that “the principal objective of Russian foreign policy [...] is the creation of a properly open, democratic system of regional collective security and cooperation”.

This adaptation of democracy discourse to the discussion of international politics served two, related purposes. Firstly, it staged a discursive challenge to US hegemony, and secondly, in doing this, underlined resistance to US intervention in the domestic politics of the post-Soviet states. It thus constituted a challenge on two grounds to US foreign policy. Resistance to hegemonic, and therefore “anti-democratic” US dominance of international relations was expressed not just in relation to material aspects – the need for a more balanced international system – but on ideological grounds. The 2007 Council on Foreign and Defence Policy report, *The World Around Russia; 2017 An Outlook for the Midterm Future*, argued that the “crisis of governance in the ‘developed’ countries” stemmed primarily from “the monopolistic position that Western democracy acquired in global ideology following the collapse of the Communist idea”. “Western democracy” – a formulation designed, like Sovereign Democracy, to stress the multiple and differentiated, rather than universal, character of democracy – is, in this reading, characterised by a number of related “dogmas”, including assumptions that “Western democracy is a universal value inherent in each society”; “Western democracy is a final goal in the development of every society”; “a US-led unipolar global system is the least conflict-prone structure”; “US domination enjoys sympathy among the majority of countries in the world because it is a new type of hegemony that is based on universal American values”; and that “it is more effective to maintain hegemony by fragmenting the geopolitical space of potential rivals” (Council on Foreign and Defence Policy, 2007, footnote, p. 43).

*The views of the Russian leadership need to be understood in the context of evidence of US instrumentalisation of the concept of democracy*

### 3. Conclusion

The concept of democracy, and democracy promotion, both became deeply contested in Russia-US relations during the presidency of George W. Bush. The US government and many US and Western European analysts have tended to attribute this contestation to an increased authoritarianism in Russia and the Russian government’s anxiety about indigenous democracy movements inside Russia and in neighbouring states (Mankoff, 2007; Ambrosio, 2009). The Russian government and many Russian analysts have, in contrast, attributed it to a perceived US policy of using concerns about democracy to attack states that pose a challenge to US hegemony and to a desire to use democracy promotion as a cover to advance national interests and weaken competitor states.

The views of the Russian leadership need to be understood in the context of evidence of US instrumentalisation of the concept of democracy. Looked at in the context of changing bilateral relations, the statements and documents of the Bush administration indicate a partial approach to democracy assessment and promotion, in which praise for democratic advances (or, at least, the limiting of criticism over democratic failings) was given to security allies in the former Soviet Union (and elsewhere) and withheld from states with which the US did not have good relations. Giving evidence on the “democracy promotion backlash” to the US Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Thomas Carothers identified as a contributory factor in the response to US democracy promotion by some states, “the glaring double standard in democracy promotion in which unfriendly non-democracies are singled out for pointed attention to their political

failings while those non-democracies that are helpful to US economic and security interests get a free pass” (Carothers, 2006).

This approach, which instrumentalised not only the practice of democracy promotion but the content of the term “democracy”, encouraged a counter-instrumentalisation on the part of Russia. The ideas of Sovereign Democracy and the democratisation of the international system acted as a means of ideational pushback against both US democracy discourse and US global dominance.

The result of this – in addition to the further deterioration of relations between the US and Russia, brought about by the exchange of charges regarding democratic failings and hypocrisy – was that the dispute over the meaning and promotion of democracy became tied to questions of state identity, state security, and conceptions of international relations. The consequences of that linkage continue to have serious consequences not only for Russia-US relations but for the post-Soviet space and for the stability of the contemporary international order.

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