

Vladomania

by the St. Louis Post-Dispatch

Russia's 16-year experiment with Western-style democracy appears to have ended Sunday. In its place comes a peculiar hybrid of democracy and autocracy, seasoned with a serious dash of Stalin-era personality cult. Call it by its formal, albeit oxymoronic, name: "sovereign democracy." Or call it what it is:

Putinism.

Russian President Vladimir Putin, in a push for personal power that might embarrass even North Korea's Kim Jung Il, turned Sunday's parliamentary elections into a referendum on himself. Although he was not running for re-election for a third term - indeed, he is constitutionally forbidden to do so, a fact that soon may change - Putin caused his name to appear on the parliamentary ballots for the United Russia Party. Ballots for the other 10 parties fielding parliamentary slates featured three names; United Russia's featured only V.V. Putin, and he received nearly two-thirds of the vote.

Having been granted the mandate he sought, Putin now must decide what to do with it. On Dec. 17, United Russia will name its candidate for next March's presidential election. It could be Putin, even though that would take an easily obtained constitutional amendment. Or, to forestall criticism from the West, Putin could have the constitution amended to remake Russia's government into a parliamentary democracy - with himself as prime minister. Or he could have one of his stooges run for president and then step down, whereupon Putin could succeed him. Or Putin could take over one of Russia's powerful energy corporations and operate behind the scenes.

Whatever his method, the end result will be the same: Russia will be governed by Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin, 55, for the indefinite future. He is said to prefer the informal title of "father of the nation" - as if he were the Russian analog of George Washington, rather than its George W. Bush.

To be sure, riding ever-increasing prices for Russian oil and natural gas, he has restored stability to the Russian economy, paid off foreign debt and restored the Russians' sense of pride in the nation. In the last days of Soviet rule and in the tumultuous era of President Boris Yeltsin in the 1990s, the ruble was in free fall, the old state institutions were paralyzed and Russia's assets were looted by oligarchs and criminal gangs. In a few short years, Russia went from being a superpower to a kind of Third World nation.

Progress has had its price. Putin has curtailed freedom of the press, except for a few small newspapers and magazines that have no broad audience. The few remaining bold journals, such as the muckraking *Novaya Gazeta*, have seen some of their journalists murdered. Putin's Kremlin controls the mass media and has turned major television stations into cesspools of brain-dead entertainment.

Critics of Putin disappear. Consider one-time spy Alexander Litvinenko, who was poisoned last year in a London sushi restaurant with a radioactive isotope traced to a Russian reactor.

British authorities have named Andrei Lugovoy, a former KGB agent, as the top suspect in the Litvinenko case and have asked Russia to extradite him. That's unlikely; Lugovoy was elected to parliament Sunday, swept in by the Putin tide. Under Russian law, lawmakers may not be extradited.

Putin threw roadblocks in the way of international election observers who wanted to oversee Sunday's election, and he denied opposing parties access to billboards and other paid media outlets. Reports of election fraud are widespread.

A few brave Russian voices are being raised in protest, but for the most part, Russians seem satisfied. Pensions and jobs have been secured, supermarkets are full and popular songs celebrate Russia's 122-millimeter Grad multiple rocket launchers. Given the choice between a comfortable tyranny and a hard liberty, Russians have chosen comfort.

The United States has no choice but to work with Russia; it's too big, too rich and too powerful to ignore. But America also must work to give voice to Russian dissidents as well, as it did for the Sakarhovs and Solzhenitsyns of a bygone era that we had hoped was over.

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