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THE "FEBRUARY THESES": SURKOV'S PRIMER ON PUTINISM

Date: 2006 March 30, 10:24 (Thursday)
Original Classification: CONFIDENTIAL
Handling Restrictions: -- Not Assigned --
Executive Order: -- Not Assigned --
TAGS: PGOV - Political Affairs--Government; Internal Governmental Affairs (/plusd/?q=&qftags=PGOV#result) | PREL - Political Affairs--External Political Relations (/plusd/?q=&qftags=PREL#result) | RS - Russia (/plusd/?q=&qftags=RS#result)
Enclosure: -- Not Assigned --
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Canonical ID: 06MOSCOW3218_a
Current Classification: CONFIDENTIAL
Character Count: 16187
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C. MOSCOW 2136 (NOTAL)

Classified By: Minister-Counselor for Political Affairs Kirk Augustine,
for reasons 1.4 (B & D)

1. (C) SUMMARY. A February speech by Deputy Head of the Presidential Administration Vladislav Surkov to a United Russia conference sketched out "basic ideological theses" of the Putin Administration. While not attempting to break new ground or crystallize a doctrine of "Putinism," the speech portrayed Putin's policies as consistent and coherent. The effort may have been stimulated in part by concern about preserving the main policy thrust of Putin's rule after 2008, when he is expected to surrender formal power. Surkov's main points included that:

- Material well-being, freedom and justice are the basic values Putin is trying to advance in Russia;
- Russia is culturally part of Europe -- and, by implication, needs no solutions premised on its being permanently "unique";
- Putin's policies avoid the failures of communism and the chaos, weakness and injustice of Yeltsin's rule and "return the real sense of the word democracy, to all democratic

institutions";

- Democracy and "sovereignty" ("a political synonym of competitiveness") are the two critical requirements for Russia to be successful over time.

- United Russia,s task is "not simply to be victorious in 2007, but to think and do whatever is necessary to ensure the party,s domination over at least the next 10-15 years" in order to prevent hostile forces from "knocking Russia off the path that has now been marked out for it to go."

The speech may foreshadow a more authoritative exposition of some of its themes by Putin in his annual address to the Federal Assembly later this spring. END SUMMARY.

Stepping into the Ideology Gap

2. (C) The Kremlin has often been criticized, especially from the "patriotic" end of the political spectrum, for failing to deploy a mobilizing ideology that would make clear what goals it is pursuing -- and make it more likely that those goals would in fact be consistently pursued. Until recently there has indeed been no effort to systematize Putin,s domestic and foreign policies or explicitly to relate the goals to any larger framework. Instead, Putin,s approach to governance has seemed ad hoc and reactive, and sometimes strongly influenced by the financial interests of figures in the inner circle. In our view, the pragmatic nature of Kremlin decision-making reflects Putin,s personality and operational (rather than academic or intellectual) background, but likely also results from a broader distrust in Russia -- after 70 years of subjection to an ideology that failed -- of all-encompassing doctrines.

3. (U) Initially delivered February 7 to a United Russia (UR) audience, Surkov,s speech was posted on the UR website February 22 and then in March carried by some Russian media. It was only the third major intervention he has made in public debate in the past 18 months, following an interview with "Komsomolskaya Pravda" in September 2004 (ref A) and remarks to the Delovaya Rossiya business group in May 2005 (ref B). Since being reprinted in the press, the speech has generated continuing attention as an expression of views by an authoritative and influential but rarely-heard-in-public "deep insider." Surkov has since expounded on some of the same themes with Ambassador (ref C).

4. (C) Surkov is indeed close to Putin and is the Kremlin operative most directly charged with managing political developments, but he is not without rivals in the PA. Some

media reports have even asserted that the speech was prompted by a need on Surkov,s part to resist attempts to weaken his position in the PA. (Comment. We heard a similar analysis from Carnegie Center analyst Andrey Ryabov, who said new PA head Sergey Sobyenin "hates" Surkov, and the latter sought to reinforce himself politically through the speech. End Comment) Most commentators, however, have stressed Surkov,s privileged access to Putin and the degree to which the speech is assumed to reflect Putin,s own outlook. Vasiliy Tretyakov, editor-in-chief of "Politicheskiy Zhurnal," called Surkov "almost the only source of our knowledge of Russia,s official ideology," and Kremlin consultant Gleb Pavlovskiy

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told us March 23 that the timing of the speech reflected the fact that "that,s when Putin gave the authorization."

Contemporary History Decoded

5. (C) Surkov identified the "fundamental values" that Putin is trying to advance as material well-being, freedom and justice. He immediately linked those goals to argumentation that Russia has historically been an inextricable part of European civilization and has undergone a broadly similar course of development as other European nations. In Russia as elsewhere in Europe, people want to participate in the political life of their society, and over time coercive forms of government increasingly give way to processes of persuasion and agreement. Democratic development in Russia will thus lead to increasing stress on ideas (ideology) and reasoned discourse, Surkov reasoned, and diminish the role of "administrative resources" and force.

6. (C) Noting that Russians hold sharply differing assessments of the Soviet experience, Surkov sought to build common ground by asserting that the Soviet Union had a progressive influence on world development (although Soviet society itself was not free or just) and established the industrial base on which Russia,s economy still depends. Despite such achievements, Soviet decisions were based on party dogma rather than efficiency. The USSR failed to meet its citizens' needs, and they -- not the CIA or some intra-party conspiracy -- brought it down. The loss of the other Soviet republics that opted for independence was a price the Russian people "more or less consciously paid" to chart their own course.

7. (C) Russian society was not ready for democracy in the 1990s, Surkov said, and it fell quickly into oligarchic rule

("manipulation instead of representation") that unfairly discredited the broader business community. Privatization was overall a positive phenomenon, but in too many cases was conducted improperly and unjustly. Chaos reigned in the relations of state and federal authorities. The outcome of the first Chechen war led to a de facto violation of Russia's territorial integrity. Yeltsin,s re-election in 1996 perverted democratic processes to avoid an outcome some were unwilling to accept. In 2000 the electorate,s support for Putin was a decision to "normalize the situation in the country," preserving good features that under Yeltsin had emerged in distorted forms. Putin has acted to "return the real sense of the word democracy, to all democratic institutions," and his policies -- unlike Yeltsin,s in the 1990s -- enjoy the support of the people.

"Sovereignty" and Threats to It

8. (U) As in his May 2005 speech (ref B), Surkov stressed the concept of "sovereignty," now defined as "a political synonym of competitiveness." Internationally, Russia needed to remain among the states that "make the decisions on the organization of world order." If it failed to do so, those decisions inevitably would not take its interests adequately into account. Moreover, Russia had for centuries been a power in international relations, unlike many surrounding states that -- having never in their national lives been genuinely sovereign -- now had no difficulty, when unhappy with Moscow, in "running to a new master" and "becoming a province of some other country." Russia had no one to run to but itself, and had to remain an independent actor able to influence world politics in support of its interests. Moscow supported a "democratization of international relations" and "fair rules for globalization" to prevent global decisions being taken by "diktat."

9. (C) Surkov identified democracy and sovereignty as the two critical requirements for Russia to be successful over time. "Only a society based on competition and cooperation among free people can be effective and competitive." Moreover, "if we are not an open democratic society, if we are not broadly integrated into the world economy...we will not have access to the contemporary Western technologies without which, I believe, Russia,s modernization will be impossible." Strengthening Russia,s democracy required strengthening civil society, including political parties, NGOs and institutions of local self-rule.

10. (U) Surkov identified four present or potential threats to Russia,s sovereignty:

- International terrorism. Intensive work, including international cooperation, would need to continue for decades to meet the threat;

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- An external military threat that now was only hypothetical. There was no guarantee today's lack of such a threat would continue, however, so keeping Russia,s army, navy and nuclear deterrent strong was essential;

- A lack of economic competitiveness. Many problems existed, including "monstrous" delays in structural reforms that sooner or later would exact a price. But Russia could not rely on free-market panaceas and expect all problems to solve themselves; Putin had identified a realistic path to follow, drawing on Russia,s competitive advantages (including the concept of an "energy superpower"); and

- A susceptibility to "orange technologies" supported from abroad: "If they (Note: Surkov does not say who "they" are. End Note) were able to do it in four countries, why not in a fifth?" Russia had in response to develop a "nationally-oriented" elite, including a nationally-oriented (rather than "off-shore") business class, and to continue Putin,s democratization policies. But while a healthy national orientation was essential, Surkov rejected isolationist and "Russia for the (ethnic) Russian" tendencies that call themselves "patriotic." If they came to power, it would be a catastrophe that might even lead to further loss of national territory. Neither oligarchic revanchists nor supporters of a nationalistic dictatorship should be "allowed to destroy democracy using democratic procedures" (as Hitler did in coming to power via free elections). Russia must be not only for the ethnic Russians, but for all the peoples of Russia.

11. (C) UR,s task, in Surkov's view, was "not simply to be victorious in 2007, but to think and do whatever is necessary to ensure the party,s domination over at least the next 10-15 years" to prevent hostile forces from "knocking Russia off the path that has now been marked out for it to go." To become a dominating force, UR members would have to internalize and propagate the "ideology" set out in presidential and party documents.

Comment

12. (C) The point of Surkov,s speech was not to break new

ground, and a number of commentators with whom we spoke (e.g., Pavlovskiy, Sergey Karaganov, Dmitriy Danilov, Valeriy Fedorov, Vladislav Nikonov) tended to dismiss it as "nothing new." Some of them, however, at the same time voiced support for the idea of clarifying the Kremlin's goals and strategies, and allowed that Surkov's speech was a step in the right direction in that regard. Andrey Ryabov told us he found the speech "static" in its assumptions and "lacking vision," and thus likely to appeal more to the bureaucracy than to intellectuals or the middle class.

14. (C) "Sovereignty" remains Surkov's key concept for addressing both internal ("sovereign democracy") and foreign policies. His linking of "sovereignty" to "competitiveness" is on the whole positive, both because it encourages Russians to focus on what actually works in the empirical world, rather than on romantic assertions of ethnic or neo-imperial identity, and because it emphasizes the need to sustain an achievement, rather than to be recognized as possessing a status. He seems, moreover, to have real insight into, if not conviction about, Russia's need to be a genuinely open society if it is to sustain its claim to being a Great Power.

At the same time, he is forced by his position -- and probably a sincere perception of Russian vulnerability -- to subordinate the demands of openness to a need for social unity, which is implicitly understood to require central control. The overall tone of his speech is nonetheless far from the "enemy at the gates" shrillness of his post-Beslan interview in September 2004, with its evocation of "fifth columns" and "dividing lines" in every community and neighborhood.

15. (C) Acknowledging that assessments of 20th century history remain highly controversial in Russia, Surkov feels for a balance that pays enough tribute to all viewpoints so that critics of the USSR and those nostalgic for it can join hands to support Putin's policies. His view of the 1990s mixes harsh criticism with a refusal to reject everything initiated under Yeltsin, but the overall picture he draws of the 1990s is nonetheless more negative than his summary of the Soviet period, reflecting the continuing desire by Putin's team to be seen above all as a corrective to the disorder, weakness, and broadly perceived injustice of the Yeltsin years.

16. (C) Surkov's stress on Russia's being fully a part of European culture seems intended to rebut arguments that it is a "unique" civilizational entity requiring political

solutions qualitatively distinct from those that have proved successful elsewhere in Europe. In that, in his unequivocal declaration that the Soviet Union fell because of its own inadequacies, and in his rejection of isolationism and ethnic chauvinism, Surkov -- who recently was named by Putin to head the organizing committee for Russia's upcoming chairmanship of the Council of Europe -- casts himself as a relative "Westernizer" or "Europeanist" among Putin's advisors. He shows that he belongs comfortably within the Kremlin spectrum, however, by saying that Putin's "policy of democratization" has returned "the real meaning of the word democracy, to all democratic institutions."

17. (C) Surkov's thesis that persuasion will increasingly drive Russian politics implies a need for UR to be an effective promoter of Putinist policies, rather than just a beneficiary of Putin's popularity, as it has been to date. But he would entrust it only with the downstream task of selling whatever the Kremlin has already decided. His speech may, as he hoped, help make UR members "forget about whether you're right-wingers or left-wingers" and recognize that the party must be a synthesis of various interests, but it will take more than a speech to convert UR into the effective political force that Surkov's thesis of politics-by-persuasion would require. UR's raison d'etre is, by Kremlin design, to support whatever Putin's team tells it to support, and it shows little sign of overcoming its congenital passivity and growing beyond Putin's coattails. In our view, it is unlikely to have more than inertial weight in promoting continuity in the succession process, unless Putin takes a leadership role in the party himself and uses it as an instrument for exerting influence on his successor as President.

18. (C) Ultimately, only Putin -- through his actions and words -- can define Putinism. As some commentators have speculated, Surkov's speech may well foreshadow a more authoritative exposition of some of the same themes by Putin in his annual address later this spring to the Federal Assembly.

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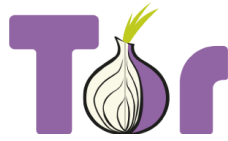
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