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## New Threats to Freedom

# DEMOCRACY'S "DOUBLES"

*Ivan Krastev*

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The era of liberal ascendancy that began in 1989 has now come to an end. The world structured by the clear-cut opposition between democracy and autocracy is no longer the world in which we live. In this new period the most obvious danger comes from radical Islam, but a more potent threat to freedom is posed by the rise of democracy's "doubles"—regimes that claim to be democratic and may look like democracies, but which rule like autocracies.<sup>1</sup> Liberal democracy today is challenged on one side by Hugo Chávez's revolutionary Venezuela and on the other by Vladimir Putin's antirevolutionary Russia. Yet while self-styled "direct democracy" in Venezuela and "directed democracy" in Russia may appear in some ways to be polar opposites, they also share a profound kinship.

A key to understanding the commonality between them is provided by Cas Mudde in a fascinating article on populism. Mudde argues that populism "considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogenous and antagonistic groups"—the people and the elite. "Populism, so defined," he adds, "has two opposites: elitism and pluralism. Elitism is populism's mirror image. . . . Pluralism, on the other hand, rejects the homogeneity of both populism and elitism, seeing society as a heterogeneous collection of groups and individuals with often fundamentally different views and wishes."<sup>2</sup> In this light, we can see that Venezuelan populism and Russian elitism are opposite sides of the same coin. Both represent a rebellion against the pluralistic character of democratic societies and democratic politics, against democracy

understood as the representation of diverse interests. Chávez's populism and Putin's directed, or "managed," democracy share the same reductionist view of modern politics as a clash between "people power" and the manipulative power of the elites (though Chávez claims to express the sentiments of "the people," while Russia relies on elite manipulation to keep in check the dangerous and self-destructive people). It is this antipluralist vision of society and politics that has propelled the rise of democracy's doubles.

In Venezuela, as Javier Corrales puts it, Chávez "has virtually eliminated the contradiction between autocracy and political competitiveness."<sup>3</sup> Having discovered that he can concentrate power more easily in the context of a strident opposition than of a banned opposition, he has refashioned authoritarianism for a democratic age. His strategy is to attack political parties, to polarize society, to spread the wealth selectively, to foster the decline of bureaucracy, to encourage a dysfunctional state, and constantly to change the rules of the game. Chávez practices democracy as a regime of controlled chaos, and by antagonizing the U.S. hyperpower he gains a source of domestic and international legitimacy.

In Russia, liberal democracy's other double, elites use managed democracy to prevent the genuine representation of the angry majority who see themselves as losers in the transition away from communism. These elites deploy such institutional elements of democracy as political parties, elections, and diverse media for the sole purpose of helping those in power to stay in power. Elections are held regularly, but they do not provide an opportunity to transfer power, only to legitimize it. Russia does not have a traditional hegemonic party like the Mexican PRI to manage its managed democracy. Instead, the key to the system is the creation of a parallel political reality. The Russian project of "democracy without representation" perfectly fits the mold of what communist propaganda used to describe as "façade democracy." The goal is "not only to establish a monopoly of power but also to monopolize the competition for it."<sup>4</sup>

Chávez's strategy is to encourage maximum confrontation and political mobilization; the Kremlin's strategy is to encourage maximum confusion and political demobilization. Democracy's doubles present themselves not as alternatives to democracy but as embodiments of real democracy. Both Chávez and Putin are masters at employing democratic rhetoric to achieve their political goals; both enjoy popular backing in national opinion polls as well as considerable support outside their own countries. Both of them are now in the business of exporting their brand of "democracy"; each spends millions of petrodollars, masked as assistance to like-minded "democrats," to promote his regional ambitions. Both are adroit in using the appeal of anti-Americanism in the world. Each of them heads a regime that in some ways resembles democracy, but in both cases the reality is a near-total monopoly of power.

In his famous 1997 *Foreign Affairs* essay “The Rise of Illiberal Democracy,” Fareed Zakaria warned that, as the global wave of democratization spilled into previously undemocratic terrain, unbridled majoritarianism might ride roughshod over constitutionalism and the rule of law. In making this claim, he echoed the worries of other observers that the spread of popularly elected governments often was not being accompanied by the spread of freedom. But Zakaria’s interpretation of the rise of illiberal democracy as a victory of electoral majoritarianism over liberal constitutionalism fails to explain the diversity of the pseudodemocratic regimes that have emerged. The rise of unrestrained majoritarianism may help to explain “the Chávez phenomenon,” with its claim to express the general will of the people, but it is of no help at all in understanding the political regime in Russia. For Russia’s managed democracy is anything but “the tyranny of the majority.”

According to Zakaria’s interpretation, illiberal democracy, the unhappy offspring of the marriage between the new global imperative of democratization and local illiberal traditions, has arisen as an unintended consequence of the worldwide democratic revolution. This is not the case with democracy’s doubles, however. Russia is not an illiberal democracy by default; it is an illiberal democracy by design. The rise of democracy’s doubles cannot be explained by an inability or unwillingness to reconcile the democratic principle and the liberal principle, or by misguided external pressure to democratize. Such regimes are characterized not by the clash between democratic majoritarianism and constitutional liberalism, but by the “instrumentalization” of democratic institutions. Democracy’s doubles can best be understood as an attempt to construct political regimes that mimic democratic institutions but work outside the logic of political representation and seek to repress any trace of genuine political pluralism. Chávez’s *democradura* and Russia’s managed democracy should be understood as conscious projects—projects that have considerable attraction and are likely to be replicated elsewhere. The ground has been prepared for them by the rise of populist politics under conditions of declining sovereignty and state weakness.

For the most part, the illiberal regimes in Venezuela and Russia are analyzed primarily in terms of the policies and personalities of their leaders, Chávez and Putin respectively. While this kind of analysis may be partially justified in the case of Venezuela, it is surely inadequate as regards Russia. Managed democracy as a political project and as a political practice did not start with Putin. It was already in place during Boris Yeltsin’s second term (1996–2000). Putin was not the inventor of managed democracy in Russia, though he has been its principal beneficiary. The key to understanding Russian politics today is not to be found in Putin’s personal background or popularity, or in the rise of his fellow *siloviki* (officials who began their careers in the old Soviet coer-

cive apparatus). I believe Russia's political system can best be grasped by looking at the country's "political technologists," the Kremlin's infamous grand masters of manipulation. Just as the Soviet regime could not be properly understood without reference to communist ideology, managed democracy today cannot be grasped without reference to the political technologists and their view of democracy and politics.

If I were to choose the two major protagonists of the new antidemocratic politics, I would put alongside Hugo Chávez not Vladimir Putin but Gleb Pavlovsky, Russia's premier political technologist. Admittedly, Pavlovsky and Chávez make a strange pair. The latter is a passionate former army officer, with a talent for expressing public sentiments, who loves elections even more than coups and spends his free time running a television show. He speaks the language of the left, appeals to the underclass, and has inspired a new generation of populist revolutions. He has made himself the symbol of "people power." Pavlovsky, by contrast, is an intellectual with a talent for manipulation and political engineering. Far from loving crowds, he fears them—though he also recently started a TV talk show. These two men—Hugo Chávez, Venezuela's populist president, and Gleb Pavlovsky, Russia's ultimate political manipulator—best symbolize the major challenge to democracy today. They are freedom's enemies from *within* both democratic discourse and the institutional framework of democracy. The ex-colonel and the political technologist are the faces of the antiliberal doubles of democracy.

## Democracy According to the Political Technologists

In a Kremlin world dominated by mediocre apparatchiks, KGB officers, and ruthless oligarchs, the political technologists might look like people from another planet. They come from the milieu of the intelligentsia and the world of alternative culture. Gleb Pavlovsky is a policy intellectual and a former dissident who was persecuted in Soviet times for his "reformist delusions." Marat Gelman is an extremely successful art-collector and gallery owner and one of the gurus of the Moscow arts community. Sergei Markov is an internationally respected academic. They all have the biographies of typical Russian Westernizers. Pavlovsky worked with George Soros and his Open Society Institute in the early 1990s and briefly acted as editor of a Russian version of the *Journal of Democracy*. Markov was a fellow in the Moscow office of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace and coauthored a book with Michael McFaul. Gelman was a favorite source for Western journalists working in Moscow. They were Russia's liberals. In the early 1990s, they proclaimed their belief in free and fair elections, limited government, democratic pluralism, and independent media. Today, however, they have all become "political technologists."

In his scandalous political thriller *The Politologist*, written in the

best tradition of conspiratorial realism, Alexander Prohanov, a leader of Russia's patriotic opposition, gives us the most sinister and at the same time most profound psychological portrait of the Russian political technologist. He is a creature from hell: cynical, disloyal, ambitious, and greedy. He is highly creative and deceptive at the same time. He is the hostage of his ambition to manipulate others. He is the consummate social engineer, but also a tool of Kremlin politics. He is a tragic figure—confused, scared, and insecure. In his own view, the political technologist is the savior of democracy in Russia; in the view of others, he is its gravedigger.

In Moscow, the way you define the meaning of “political technologist” is a significant indicator of your political positions and moral taste: “Political technologist” can mean a policy analyst or political consultant; it can mean an expert in “black PR” or in contaminating the political environment; it can mean a Kremlin insider or political provocateur. Contrary to the common view of the Western media, “political technologist” is not simply the Russian term for “spin doctor.” What makes political technologists a different species from the other election strategists or PR consultants who have populated the strange world of Russian politics is their direct or indirect connection to the Kremlin. The Russian political technologist resembles a Western political consultant in the way that the electric chair resembles an armchair.

Political consultants in the West (however low one's opinion of them) work with independent media, and their trade is influencing these media. Political technologists are experts in manipulating dependent media. Political consultants in the West are experts at winning votes for their candidates; political technologists are also specialists in winning votes, but they take matters one step further—they are also specialists in “creative counting” of the votes. A political consultant works for one of the parties in an election and does his best to help that party win; the political technologist is not interested in the victory of his party but in the victory of “the system.” His goal is not to maximize the vote for his client, but to obtain an election result as close as possible to the percentage of the vote that the Kremlin has planned for his client.

In other words, political technologists are those in charge of maintaining the illusion of competitiveness in Russian politics. As Andrew Wilson puts it, “Post-Soviet political technologists . . . see themselves as political metaprogrammers, system designers, decision-makers and controllers all in one, applying whatever technology they can to the construction of politics as a whole.”<sup>5</sup> Their role in Russian politics recalls that of Gosplan in the Soviet economy. They are the ideologues and the symbol of Russian managed democracy. They operate in a “world of ‘clones’ and ‘doubles’; of ‘administrative resources,’ ‘active measures,’ and ‘kompromat’ [compromising information]; of parties that stand in elections but have no staff or membership or office . . . of well-

paid insiders that stand as the regime's most vociferous opponents; and of scarecrow nationalists and fake coups."<sup>6</sup> Political technologists are the principal enemy of democratic pluralism.

Political technologists play several different institutional roles at one and the same time. They run think tanks and speak as experts on behalf of the public good.<sup>7</sup> They are also consultants who speak the language of business and deny any political affiliation with their various clients; this does not prevent them, however, from also presenting themselves as independent political commentators who interpret for the public what is going on in Russian and global politics. When it becomes necessary, the political technologist, as a sacrifice of last resort, is even ready to take a public job. In 2003, just before the parliamentary elections, Marat Gelman was appointed as deputy director of the public television station ORT-Russia to help ensure that political parties would gain the electoral results that were planned for them. In the wake of the Orange Revolution in Ukraine, Modest Kolerov, Pavlovsky's deputy at the Center for Effective Policies, joined the presidential administration as head of the new "anti-Orange" department dealing with the post-Soviet republics. The political technologist can be found everywhere in the policy process, performing all kinds of jobs. In his role as "gray cardinal," Pavlovsky urged the Kremlin to adopt new legislation that would create a body known as the Public Chamber in order to control Russia's NGOs. In his role as a policy expert he supported the move, and then in his role as an independent political commentator he explained to the public what a wonderful policy the Kremlin had initiated. The circle was closed.

Those who question the real importance of political technologists, contending that they are less influential in Kremlin decision making than the *siloviki* or the in-house oligarchs, fail to recognize that the political technologists' impact is greatest in framing political issues and not in lobbying for concrete policies. In this sense, the political technologists can be analyzed as a *collective* player in Russian politics, despite the fact that in real life political technologists constantly compete with and often passionately hate one another. It is their shared view of the nature and the goals of current Russian politics that makes the political technologists so revealing with regard to the nature of the political regime in Moscow. Their interest is the interest of the system.

## Manipulating the Media

The type of political regime that governs Russia today would have been unthinkable in the pre-television age. The art of the political technologists lies in replacing the *political* representation of values, interests, and ideas that is at the heart of liberal democracy with the *media* representation of a nonexisting political reality that is at the core of managed

democracy. Their ideology is a Molotov cocktail of French postmodernism and KGB instrumentalism. What the political technologists have borrowed from the postmodernists is their intuition of “the unreality of reality.” What they borrowed from the rich tradition of the Soviet secret

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*The political technologists’ ideology is a Molotov cocktail of French postmodernism and KGB-inspired instrumentalism.*

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police were the technologies that can make the unreal real. The role of television and media manipulation in establishing managed democracy in the post-Soviet states is perhaps best captured by a poster that one Ukrainian youth carried in the streets of Kiev during the Orange Revolution in late 2004. The poster read: “Kill the TV in yourself.”

A common thread in the otherwise diverse ideological views of people like Gleb Pavlovsky, Marat Gelman, and Sergei Markov is their militant antirevolutionism and their self-proclaimed break with the traditional politics of the Russian intelligentsia. In Pavlovsky’s words, “Our position on revolution is simple: no revolutions and no encouragement of revolutions.”<sup>7</sup> The demonstrative cynicism of the political technologists is intended as a direct challenge to the idealism of the Russian revolutionary intelligentsia at the beginning of the last century. Their open ambition for money and status is the opposite of the culture of self-sacrifice and the attachment to nonmaterial values of the old Russian intelligentsia. Their project of excluding the people from political life runs directly contrary to the old intelligentsia’s mission of giving power to the people.

The political technologists believe that their mission is to save democracy from the antidemocratic impulse of those on top and from the populist egalitarianism and communist nostalgia of those below. For them the government is the only real liberal force in Russia. In their eyes, “Liberal democracy is nothing more than a mechanism of elite control through the use of elections, parties . . . and most importantly, ‘the independent media.’”<sup>8</sup> They have fashioned themselves as the postliberal postintelligentsia.

In 1999, determined to stop the Communists and their allies—Moscow mayor Yuri Luzhkov and then-premier Yevgeny Primakov—from coming to power, the political technologists served as the major instrument for the Yeltsin “family” in securing the presidential succession in Moscow. They counseled the appointed crown prince Vladimir Putin to organize a small victorious war in Chechnya, and they advised Boris Yeltsin to step down in favor of Putin before the end of his presidential term. In the course of the 1999 parliamentary elections, they succeeded in destroying the presidential ambitions and political chances of the still-popular Primakov in less than a month with a “campaign” based on

*kompromat* and blackmail. During the 2003 parliamentary elections they came up with the project of creating a nationalistic and openly anti-Semitic party (Motherland) in order to prevent the nationalist vote from going to the Communists. In the same 2003 parliamentary elections, as Andrew Wilson notes, the political technologists also backed “the Agrarians, the Party of Russia’s Rebirth, the New Communist Party, and a handful of left-nationalist parties like Rus and the Eurasia Union. A fly-storm can take a large collective bite; and the communist vote duly dropped from 24.3 percent in 1999 to 12.7 percent four years later.”<sup>9</sup> The political technologists’ strategy might be dubbed “preventive representation.”

Now, on the eve of the 2007 parliamentary elections, the political technologists are back in the laboratory. They passionately disagree over whether the Kremlin should go into these elections represented by one, two, or three parties and over who should be anointed as the head of the opposition. Their ultimate goal, of course, is to arrange the succession that will take place during the presidential election in 2008.

In hindsight, two events appear to have been critical in shaping the emergence of Russia’s managed democracy: Yeltsin’s bombardment of the Russian parliament building in October 1993 and his victory in the presidential election of June 1996. The attack on parliament convinced the elites of the undesirability and limited effectiveness of violence. The reelection campaign convinced them of the power and effectiveness of manipulation. Managed democracy was justified as the best way to prevent a communist restoration. For this reason, it appealed not only to some Russian liberals but also to Western governments, whose greatest fear was that Yeltsin would be defeated by the Communists. The establishment of managed democracy in Russia would never have been possible without the endorsement of the West. It was the decision of Western governments to endorse Yeltsin and not to insist on fair elections that brought to life the current regime in Russia.

In its social origins, managed democracy reflected the strange relations between the rulers and the ruled in Yeltsin’s Russia. As Stephen Holmes has insightfully portrayed this relationship, “Those at the top neither exploit nor oppress those at the bottom. They do not even govern them; they simply ignore them.”<sup>10</sup> Managed democracy is a political regime that liberates the elites from the necessity of governing and gives them time to take care of their personal business. It was perceived as the best instrument for avoiding a bloody revolution; at the same time, it created room for “the criminal revolution” that transferred much of the nation’s wealth into the hands of few powerful insiders. It was the most suitable regime for a “nontaxing state.” When government taxes people, it has to provide benefits in return, beginning with services, accountability, and good governance, but ending with liberty and representation.

This reciprocal exchange between taxation and representation is what

gives government legitimacy in the modern world. Russia's managed democracy succeeded in perverting this logic. There were taxes in Russia, but nobody really cared to collect them; there were elections, but they were not allowed to represent real interests. Postcommunist elites discovered the irresistible charm of state weakness. Russia was a weak state, but it was also a cunning state, one that was quite selective in its weakness. It failed to pay the salaries of workers, but was strong enough to redistribute property and even to repay foreign debts when this was in the interests of the elites. The regime's strategy was to keep up the illusion of political representation while at the same time preventing the interests and sentiments of the transition's losers from being represented. Managed democracy made the elites totally independent of citizens' legitimate claims. None of the reforms implemented in Russia in the heyday of managed democracy was initiated by pressure from below. It is this total disregard for the basic needs of the people that constitutes the most vulnerable spot of Russia's managed democracy. And it is not by accident that Putin's response to the Orange Revolution in Ukraine was a return to classic Soviet measures—more repression but also more social care and state paternalism.

### **The World of the Doubles**

The political technologists and their project look as typically Russian as a cold winter, a bottle of vodka, or a game of Russian roulette. Chávez and his revolution look as typically Latin American as a military coup, Che Guevara, or a Mexican soap opera. But these impressions are misleading in both cases. The rise of managed democracy is a trend that extends beyond the post-Soviet world; hence it cannot be explained simply by the peculiarities of Russian political culture. The broader appeal of managed democracy is due to several other factors present in many parts of the globe: the status of democracy and elections as the only acceptable source of legitimacy in the modern world; the increasing costs of violence as an instrument for preserving power; the widening gap between elected officials and voting publics; the rise of the virtual world of TV and the Internet; and the de-ideologization of modern politics. In the context of rising populist pressures from below, political elites in different parts of the world, anxious to secure their positions, find it attractive to establish managed democracies based on soft repression and hard manipulation.

Similarly, the rise of populist revolutions is not a strictly Latin American phenomenon. The "color revolutions" that have swept some of the post-Soviet republics in the last few years are not so different in their social origins and political claims from the leftist electoral revolutions in Latin America. The color revolutions expressed a strong desire for change, but not necessarily a desire for more democracy, let alone more

capitalism. The people on the streets of Kiev, unlike the people on the streets of Central Europe in 1989 (but like populist voters in Latin America today) were asking for a revision of privatization, not for more privatization. The color revolutions marked the collapse of post-Soviet hybrid regimes, but it is not clear if they mark the emergence of a new democratic wave in Eurasia. Democratic ideas played only a limited role in mobilizing support for the color revolutions, whose victors won power as opposition movements rather than as democratic movements. As Michael McFaul has observed, their “main message was a cry of ‘Enough!’ hurled in the face of the incumbent powerholders.”<sup>11</sup>

Surprisingly, the similarities between Eurasia’s color revolutions and the recent dramatic changes in Latin America have remained largely unnoticed. Observers have been blinded by the fact that the Orange Revolution was led by a free-market liberal like Yushenko, while Latin America’s electoral revolutions have been led by leftists sympathetic to Fidel Castro. The similarities between Ukraine and Latin America were also obscured by the fact that anti-elite rhetoric in Ukraine spoke with anti-Russian accents, while Latin American anti-elitism speaks the language of anti-Americanism.

It has turned out that the blurring of the old clash between left and right, far from leading to an advance of democracy, is threatening its future. The ultimate manifestation of the new threat to democracy is the corruption-centered discourse on politics. This discourse moralizes policy debate to the point where politics is reduced to a choice between the corrupt government and not-yet-corrupt opposition. The core of political discourse becomes claims not about the future but about fraud. Ukrainian voters in the days of the Orange Revolution contested the fraudulent elections and took to the streets. The angry electorates in Latin America protest not only against the neoliberals and their policies but much more against the fraud and the “violin politics” of the establishment. (Governing in Latin America during the last decade and a half was like playing a violin: You hold the violin with your left hand, but you play it with your right one—that is, you win office on a radical platform, but you govern as a moderate.)

The distinctive feature of the new politics is that the new populist majorities do not have a clear project for transforming society. They are inspired not so much by hope as by the sense of betrayal. They are moralistic, not programmatic. They represent the crisis of traditional political identities. In their view, social and political change is possible only through a total change of the elite. The absence of new ideas and of a new vision for the social world has resulted in rising pressure to put new people in power. The war cry of the new protest politics is Chávez’s electoral slogan: “Get rid of them all!”

The response of people in power to the rise of “people power” has been the politics of total manipulation. The emptiness of the populist

message makes it impossible to argue against. The sense that democracy entails the representation of diverse ideas and interests is in danger of being lost. Chávez's "direct democracy" and Russia's "directed democracy" pose a clear challenge to the political pluralism that is central to liberal democracy. The deficit of political pluralism is the hallmark of democracy's doubles. The populist leader and the political technologist are the twin embodiments of the major threat to liberal democracy today.

## NOTES

They are many people who directly or indirectly contributed to this article but my greatest thanks go to my colleagues at the Centre for Liberal Strategies in Sofia, who not only contributed but in a sense coauthored the text.

1. Among the many different meanings of the word "double," the one that strikes me as most suggestive for the purpose of this essay is "a stand-in for movie stars to perform dangerous stunts."

2. Cas Mudde, "The Populist Zeitgeist," *Government and Opposition* 39 (September 2004): 543.

3. Javier Corrales, "Hugo Boss," *Foreign Policy*, January–February 2006, 32–40.

4. Martin Wolf, "Putin Puts Prosperity at Risk," *Financial Times*, 4 November 2003.

5. Andrew Wilson, "Virtual Politics: 'Political Technology' and the Corruption of Post-Soviet Democracy," *Johnson's Russia List E-mail Newsletter*, 21 December 2005. Available at [www.cdi.org/russia/johnson/9324-5.cfm](http://www.cdi.org/russia/johnson/9324-5.cfm).

6. Andrew Wilson, *Virtual Politics: Faking Democracy in the Post-Soviet World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), xiii.

7. Pavlovsky quote, Interfax, 15 November 2005.

8. Mikhail Leontiev, *Vnutrenii Vrag* (Internal Enemy) (Moscow: ESKMO Press, 2005), 14.

9. Andrew Wilson, "Virtual Politics."

10. Stephen Holmes, cited by Richard Pipes in "On Democracy in Russia: It's Not a Pretty Picture," *New York Times*, 3 June 2004.

11. Michael McFaul, "Transitions from Postcommunism," *Journal of Democracy* 16 (July 2005): 16.