

U.S. ASSISTANCE FOR DEMOCRATIC REFORM IN RUSSIA: AN ASSESSMENT

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U.S. assistance programs to promote democracy and civil society in Russia have been successful in helping Russia embark on the long, difficult road of building democracy. Only eight years ago, Russia was part of the Soviet Union; democracy was proscribed by the regime. Since then, Russia has taken important steps forward—mostly on its own, but with U.S. help.

Russia is today an electoral, though not a liberal, democracy. Elections have been accepted, by all major political actors, as the only game in town for assuming political power. The December 1999 Duma election is the latest in a series of national and regional elections. Turnout rates have been high (61 percent voted in the Duma election), the elections have generally met a “free and fair” standard, and a significant number of incumbents have lost. Given Russia’s thousand-year authoritarian history, progress made during the last decade is remarkable.

Yet Russia’s democracy is young and flawed. A liberal democracy features an independent judiciary, a respected constitution, an independent media, the rule of law, a robust civil society, strong political parties, and a strong and democratically-elected parliament. Many of these attributes are weak in today’s Russia; corruption is endemic, and political parties are weak. But Russia has taken steps forward, with U.S. assistance, on many elements of liberal democracy. Regarding civil society, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are growing across Russia. Russians, perhaps for the first time, now enjoy “political space.” Access to the internet and independent media, freedom of assembly and expression, vastly increased (if incomplete) freedom of religion—these aspects of Russian life are now almost taken for granted. An independent judiciary and media are fledgling, but growing. Again, these are Russian achievements—but U.S. assistance helped in each area.

In this essay, I will discuss the most successful democracy programs of the United States, our less productive ones, and where U.S. efforts will be focused

in the future. My central point is that our most successful programs have proven to be grassroots programs such as exchanges, support for NGOs, and internet access. These programs have yielded higher dividends than those that work with the Russian central government or with existing, “top-down” institutions. One of the main lessons learned over the past decade is that building the range of liberal democratic institutions in Russia will be a long-term, generational, even multigenerational process. The best way for America to help is by persistently engaging Russians at the grassroots.

America’s Most Successful Efforts to Promote Democratic Reform in Russia

U.S. exchange programs have proven to be among our best vehicles to promote democracy in Russia. The United States has concentrated resources on exchanges, and through them has promoted more democratic, pro-market mindsets among the next generation of Russian leaders. Over 40,000 Russians have visited the U.S. on exchanges since 1993, exposing them to the American system and providing training in practical democratic and market-related skills. Participants have included students, entrepreneurs, regional government officials, and many others.

Exchanges work at the grassroots by changing mindsets. And there is increasing evidence in the development literature that promoting ownership of ideas (in this case, ideas about democracy) is more effective in promoting reform than standard IMF or World Bank conditionality.¹ The studies show that domestic support for reform is the most important

¹ See The World Bank, *Assessing AID: What Works, What Doesn't and Why* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).

THE HARRIMAN REVIEW

variable affecting the success of aid. Exchanges—exposure to the U.S. and alternative ideas about organizing society—are among our best ways of promoting support for the idea of democracy among Russians. Exchanges, therefore, both directly promote democratic reform and create an environment in which other democracy programs can be effective.

There is also empirical evidence that exchanges work. Surveys show that returned high school exchange participants are more supportive of democracy and market ideas than their counterparts.² They also show that participants in business-oriented exchanges are more supportive of rapid economic reform and foreign investment, and are more optimistic than their peers about Russia's future.³

The U.S. Regional Initiative (RI) focuses a wide range of assistance programs on progressive Russian regions. The goal is to create successful models of regional development which can be replicated in other regions and serve as models for reform of the central government. Democracy building is one key component of the Regional Initiatives, which also include programs that focus on small business development and investment promotion. The U.S. is currently targeting Novgorod, Samara, and Sakhalin; a fourth site will begin this year in Tomsk. RI has helped increase citizen participation in regional government, bring more transparency to budget processes, and strengthen regional NGOs.

U.S. assistance to NGOs has strengthened Russia's rudimentary civil society; NGOs actively involve citizens in Russian political life. There are now over 65,000 active, registered NGOs in Russia. At least 15 percent have received U.S. support. Fifty-four U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) NGO Resource Centers have provided small grants and training to NGOs across Russia. The Siberian Resource Center in Novosibirsk has been particularly successful in reaching more than 1,000 grassroots organizations across an area the size of the continental U.S.

Though the majority of Russian NGOs are small, some have influenced legislation at the national and regional level. NGOs that help regional and local

governments deliver social services play an especially important role in Russia. In Novgorod, for example, the U.S. helped the regional government set up a competitive bidding process that resulted in NGOs providing a number of local services. The newly formed Russian Association of Crisis Centers has brought together over 40 local centers that assist victims of domestic violence.

The U.S. has effectively supported the growth of *independent media*, especially in Russia's regions. Most Russian media are heavily controlled by oligarchs and regional administrations, but some outlets have increased their advertising revenue and independence. AID, through the NGO Internews, has assisted over 300 regional non-state TV stations throughout Russia. Some of these stations offer very open, critical views of local and national events. Independent stations have raised their audience share to over 30 percent in many local markets. In the print sector, the National Press Institute (which has received U.S. support through New York University) has provided professional and other support to 110 non-state papers, increasing the papers' self-sustainability in the vast majority of cases.

Together with the Open Society Institute, the U.S. Information Agency (now part of the State Department) has increased Russians' access to the *internet*. Bringing the free flow of ideas to Russia promotes democracy and civil society. Also, the restoration of authoritarianism is much harder once citizens are accustomed to intellectual freedom. Since 1996, USIA has established over 50 public access internet sites across Russia and the New Independent States (NIS)—reaching over 10,000 users. Thirty-three of these sites are in Russia.

Russia has established a culture of relatively free and fair *elections*. Though many aspects of this culture remain problematic, including campaign finance and equal access for candidates to the media, Russia's adoption of elections is a seminal advance. At least in a small way, U.S. assistance helped promote Russia's electoral culture. The AID-funded International Foundation for Election Systems (IFES) has helped develop more professional election procedures throughout Russia by working with the Central Election Commission. It has also helped increase the capacity of regional authorities to hold elections, and has conducted a range of voter education programs.

Finally, the U.S. has worked to promote *judicial reform* in Russia—these programs have met with more success than is commonly recognized. After

² U.S. Information Agency, "FLEX Alumni: A Breed Apart From Other Russian Youth," Opinion Analysis, September 1, 1998.

³ Susan Lehman, "BFR Program Evaluation," March 22, 1999 (unpublished manuscript).

considerable exposure through exchanges to the Administrative Office of the U.S. Courts, Russian experts established the Judicial Department in 1997 outside the Ministry of Justice. The Department administers the Courts of General Jurisdiction. Control of the courts by an apolitical organ of the judiciary significantly increases judicial independence. In 1998, the Department received its first separate appropriation, though it is seriously underfunded. U.S. programs are working with the Judicial Department to increase its independence.

USAID has for several years worked with the Commercial (Arbitrazh) Courts – because they have always been independent of the Ministry of Justice and more open to reform. We have worked with the Commercial Courts to train hundreds of judges in fundamental concepts of market-oriented commercial law. Also, we are working with the Russian council that sits in judgment of judges accused of ethics lapses, helping it improve work on legal ethics.

The U.S. has also emphasized grassroots legal reform. AID-funded American Bar Association programs work with lawyers and legal professional groups to develop advocacy skills and responsiveness to public needs. We have supported law school curriculum reform, and the expansion of clinical legal education and legal clinics. These clinics – examples include clinics on environmental, labor, and women's issues—help channel citizens' real grievances into the courts. They are in effect helping create a "demand" side to legal reform by promoting use of and trust in the courts.

However, building respect for the rule of law and stemming corruption will be a long-term process. Respect for civil and commercial law remains at a low level. Corruption is pervasive in Russia. While U.S. assistance has promoted reform on rule of law issues, foreign aid cannot induce major changes in this most basic element of Russian society. Only the political will of the Russian people, acting through a democratic political system, can eradicate corruption, build a strong and independent judiciary, and install the rule of law.

The Problem of Interest Articulation in Russia

I will now turn to a key area where U.S. assistance has worked with lower rates of success. In Russia, interest aggregation and articulation into the political system have not developed to a significant extent. There is very little "bottom up" communication of interests from Russian citizens to their politicians. Political parties serve this function in Western democracies, but political parties have not matured as many expected in Russia, despite well-designed efforts to nurture them in our assistance program. Nor have NGOs stepped in to fill much of this void. It is a central problem in the development of Russian democracy.

Many reasons for the lack of interest articulation are plausible. First, Russians do not have an answer to the question: "How can democracy improve my life?" Most Russians are fundamentally not convinced that it can. They see no evidence that democracy can or will improve the quality of their lives.⁴ Many Russians do not think that elected officials effectively represent their interests. Russian history has left post-Soviet Russia with no organic link between the people and the government, and the Yeltsin regime did not try to build this link.

Second, Russian political culture remains predominantly "top-down" in structure. Elite politics and interests count more than public opinion. Almost all political parties are elite structures—either Kremlin dominated (Unity), personality-driven (Otechestvo, LDPR), or hierarchical (KPRF). Only Yabloko and the Union of Right-Wing Forces (SPS) have some grassroots character; but Yabloko lost standing in last year's Duma election, and SPS' success was related to its endorsement of the war in Chechnya. Regarding regional politics, most governors have immense power—in the worst cases, they preside in a feudal-like manner.

The third and perhaps central reason for the lack of interest articulation is the stunted growth of the middle class in Russia—an incipient middle class was hit hard by the August 1998 financial crisis. The middle class is the bulwark of democracy for several reasons. They

⁴ The author has visited over a dozen Russian regions during the past 18 months; these observations are based on discussions with Russians across the country.

THE HARRIMAN REVIEW

have a vested interest in the system—the middle class benefit from property rights and actively support the rule of law to protect these rights. The middle class have the “leisure time” to engage in interest articulation and political activity. And members of this class typically feel empowered to affect their political environment; Americans, for example, tend to form groups to advance causes.

Probably for a combination of these reasons, interest articulation is a key missing element of Russian democracy. The Russian political landscape is not ready for political parties as we know them in the West. U.S. assistance, with noble goals, has promoted political party building, but with quite limited success.

Looking Ahead

Our most successful programs, not surprisingly, represent the future of U.S. assistance for democratic reform in Russia. The United States will emphasize grassroots programs, recognizing that the transition will be a long one. Exchanges, internet, and support for NGOs and independent media will be priorities. We will continue the Regional Initiative, which has proven to be a dynamic program that targets reformist interlocutors in the regions. The U.S. will also promote, to the extent resources allow, the growth of the middle class in Russia—through programs such as support for small business. We will attempt to help this key constituency for democracy grow. Finally, we will implement a new initiative to strengthen a Russian school of public policy at Moscow State University. An American university will work in partnership with Moscow State to improve training for aspiring and current officials in budgeting, management, ethics, and a range of other governance-related issues.

Americans should have no illusions that we can create democracy in Russia. Russian democracy is for Russians to create, if they so choose. But we do have strong programs in place, programs that are making a contribution to the long-term process of democratic reform.

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