

Strategies for US Democracy Assistance to Russia After Market Failure

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While the collapse of Russia's market last summer did not destroy new, partially-formed, post-Soviet political and social institutions, their condition this winter is far from stable. The non-governmental organizations (NGOs) commonly associated with democratic development, such as political parties, independent media, unions, legal reform and civic advocacy groups, are increasingly fragile and potentially as hollow as those once associated with the market. Rather than cutting assistance to Russia because of market failures, the US government and the many US NGOs that have worked for several years with Russian NGOs now need to revise strategies and intensify activity, lest we see democratization in Russia go the way of economic reform.

Democratization After Boom and Bust

The situation is tenuous indeed. In the last several years, a multiparty system has developed in Russia, but it continues to be extremely weak. While the parliament has become a more important political player in the internal balance of power, it has done little to improve the lives of the citizens it represents, many of whom have not been paid for months. Elections--both national and regional--have been held for the last several years on schedule and with increasing transparency, but corruption is widespread and abuses of power continue throughout the country. Several Russian politicians are consumed with positioning themselves for the presidential elections scheduled for 2000. No viable candidates are clear supporters of democratization. Then again, the "democrat" elected president in 1996 waged an internal war in 1994 and 1995 that killed as many as 100,000.

Media outlets independent from the state continue to print newspapers and produce television shows despite being hard hit by the economic collapse. Nevertheless, insiders fearing the election of a nationalist president are asking Westerners to closely monitor freedom of the press. In a historic case, a court in St. Petersburg recently dismissed charges of treason brought by the KGB successor, the Federal Security Service, against an environmental campaigner. But throughout Russia, conscripts suffer from human rights abuses at the hands of their commanding officers. Although over 40,000 Russian NGOs now exist, most have seen their bank accounts shrink along with the ruble. Unfortunately, NGOs have done such a poor job of advocating on citizens' behalf that few Russians will notice.

Stay Engaged: Make Democracy Assistance the Priority

Is Russia an "illiberal democracy?" If so, will our continued engagement make matters worse? The answer to both questions is no, but one can hardly blame the public or politicians in this country for thinking otherwise. Before the market collapse, those organizations engaged in democracy assistance failed to educate the public concerning the process of democratization--in particular, about realistic expectations for the uneven pace and limited scope of change. Since the collapse, one hears only about the corrosive effects of foreign (meaning economic) assistance, with little mention of work done in the political and social sectors.

Russia is a democratizing state. Because political reform is incomplete, Russia's isolation from the West is more likely to promote illiberal outcomes--potentially even political collapse. Imagine what Germany or Japan would look like today if in 1952 the West had decided that the process of transformation was not fast or substantial enough and had cut ties. However fragile and poorly functioning the political and social institutions, most Russian activists would argue that their existence and continued development are in part dependent on contact with US NGOs. The US government has funded much of the work done by US NGOs in Russia. While there may be sound reasons to discontinue economic assistance, they do not apply to democracy assistance.

At this critical juncture, the US government should alter the assistance strategy that prioritized market reform ahead of democratic change in Russia. Despite what US policymakers say about the importance of developing democratic institutions, the reality is that from 1992-96, USAID spent over 50% of its budget in Russia supporting US consulting firms working on market reform, while allocating merely 6% to US NGOs working on democracy assistance. In FY-97 and FY-98, the percentage allocated to democracy assistance went up, but with decreased overall spending, the actual dollar amount for democracy assistance went down. US policymakers should now commit to democracy assistance in deed through adequate funding of NGOs.

Change NGO Strategies: Address the Crisis of Governance Through Advocacy

With this funding, US NGOs cannot continue with "business as usual." Instead, they need to coordinate an advocacy campaign with Russian political and social non-governmental institutions to systematically address the crisis of governance afflicting Russia. Networks of NGO contacts--extending far beyond those connecting the ministries inside the Washington Beltway and the Moscow Ring Road, and evolving over the last several years with the help of US government funding and private foundations--are the transnational mechanisms in place to carry out this work. There are numerous historical and contemporary examples of well-coordinated NGO campaigns targeted at specific issues, such as human rights abuses, that have succeeded in altering government practices. Such campaigns, like the democratization work that has already been done, are not easy. However, without governance and advocacy, new political and social

institutions may--like their economic counterparts--become bankrupt. Then, US democracy assistance would more correctly be associated with the poorly executed, wasted efforts of economic assistance.

To draw immediate attention to the problems of governance and the need for advocacy in Russia, US NGOs, with financial support from USAID and private donors, should sponsor an NGO summit this winter, followed by a series of meetings in the regions with activists from throughout Russia. These meetings, held in the winter and spring, would simultaneously highlight the work of Russian NGOs that have managed to influence policy, and encourage Russian NGOs to advocate on behalf of those they represent.

Optimally, NGOs inside a state influence policy through networks with other NGOs, including political parties and unions, and by links to the legislative and executive branches. Today, networks inside Russia are loose, and government links are for the most part shunned. This situation represents a danger to democratization, only compounded by the economic crisis. But the networks linking Russian NGOs to groups outside Russia could play a crucial role in a coordinated NGO campaign for better governance through advocacy. This could help avert a political meltdown and give Russians a positive stake in the transformation of their country.

One of the main reasons, aside from the considerable Soviet legacy, that Russian NGOs have not yet developed into advocacy groups is that the Western NGOs so crucial to their existence and development have not encouraged them to engage in the political process. US NGOs in particular fear appearing "political." The reality, of course, is that the programs the US NGOs run are de facto political because they involve the redistribution of resources (in the form of labor, information and legitimacy) from the remnants of the Soviet state to post-Soviet society. While US NGOs have in the past cautioned their Russian counterparts against direct involvement with the government, the strategies used by both Russian and US NGOs must now change.

US NGOs need to alter their strategies in other ways. An NGO summit and subsequent meetings will take unprecedented amounts of coordination on the part of US NGOs. Additionally, evidence suggests that the more Western NGOs use strategies informed and driven by the local situation, the more they are likely to be influential in the transfer of democratic ideas and practices. To make sense of the local context, Western NGOs need to rely on regional and local experts. Many NGOs have done an inadequate job of this in two respects. NGOs tend to prioritize their hiring needs according to technical expertise (e.g. knowledge about how to set up a party or be a civic advocate) rather than regional expertise. Organizations should instead employ teams that include both types of experts. Additionally, NGOs tend to use "global" approaches to problems. "It worked in Chile or South Africa, let's try it in Russia" is a common attitude. NGOs need rather to strategize based on the Russian context while at the same time drawing on lessons learned elsewhere. But the recipes (and the strategies) for democratization need to be derived mainly from local ingredients rather than a global cookbook.

Straight Talk About Democratization and Democracy Assistance

These recommendations require money, but democracy assistance costs less than the billions of dollars spent each year on nuclear weapons and economic assistance. USAID is preparing for major cuts in the near future, and democracy assistance could be eliminated by a Congress angry with Russian foreign policy and disappointed by its other investments in Russia. Congress must not punish Russian activists because of what Prime Minister Primakov says or does with Slobodan Milosevic or Saddam Hussein. At the same time, Congress should not be promised returns that can never be fulfilled.

Russia's democratic future cannot be guaranteed by this assistance, but isolation makes it even less likely. Members of Congress need to better understand the democratization process rather than read (or demand) "success stories" about immediate and tenuous outcomes. Surely members can grasp that, just as in US history, institution-building is a slow, uneven process that requires generational change before it achieves a "taken for granted quality" and becomes irreversible. USAID and the NGOs that receive government funding need to engage in some public education at home, talking straight about reasonable expectations for results as well as the dangers of isolation. Congress would then realize that decreasing democracy assistance to Russia when the process of democratization is increasingly vulnerable makes no sense and is not in US (or Russian) interests.

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Although the views expressed here are the author's alone, this memo draws on findings from "Evaluating NGO Strategies for Democratization and Conflict Prevention in the Formerly Communist States," a Columbia University collaborative research project funded by the Carnegie Corporation and directed by the author