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CONTENTS

Introduction 1
Why Change? 2
Why Now? 5
The Civil Society Summit, July 2009 8
Next Steps 10
Remaining Challenges 14
Introduction

In Russia, as in the United States, many of the challenges that the population faces cannot be fixed by government action alone. Similarly, much of what the new U.S. administration hopes to accomplish with the Russian authorities cannot be achieved solely through joint government agreements. At the same time, the ability of Americans to enhance democratic development inside Russia is now widely viewed as minimal, even though there are serious asymmetries that exist in our civil societies, with some Russian colleagues living every day with threats to their lives because of the work they do. Given all this, how should we in U.S. and Russian civil society engage one another to best address problems and challenges we face?

Over two days in July 2009, CSIS, along with colleagues from the Eurasia Foundation and the New Eurasia Foundation, convened a “Civil Society Summit” (CSS) in Moscow that explored answers to this central question. The meeting was timed to coincide with President Barack Obama’s visit to Moscow. At the end of the second day, after listening to reports from several participants touching on the challenges we face in public health, community development, next generation education, the environment, new media, and human rights, President Obama’s speech to the CSS participants carried the message “Russia’s future is up to the Russian people.” He endorsed the approach we explored of engaging one another in “this summit, designed not to lecture, but to listen…; not teach or impose solutions, but to learn from each other, from the

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1 Sarah E. Mendelson is director of the CSIS Human Rights and Security Initiative. She thanks participants in the May 18, 2009, Ed A. Hewett Forum on Former Soviet Affairs held at the Brookings Institution, as well as Thomas Bledsoe, Calvin Holmes, Elizabeth McKeon, and three anonymous readers for thoughtful comments. Some of the ideas expressed here have been developed in conjunction with the convening of the July 2009 Civil Society Summit, and she thanks all the participants of the summit. The author thanks Horton Beebe-Center and Andrey Kortunov, as well as the staffs of the Eurasia Foundation and the New Eurasia Foundation, for their collaboration on that project. This policy memo has been supported by a grant from the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation.
bottom up.” His comments suggest there is interest in exploring, and perhaps supporting, a new approach to U.S.-Russian civil society relations.

What would that new approach look like, and how would it be different from previous models? In this policy memo, I suggest U.S. government-funded efforts ought to shift from “democracy assistance” (sometimes referred to as “technical assistance”)—where Americans go to Russia to help teach and train—to a new model of peer-to-peer engagement—where Americans who work on relevant issues in the United States come together periodically with Russians who work on similar issues in Russia to share best practices, explore common problems, and where practical, undertake joint projects. Below, I suggest the previous assistance model needs either to be supplemented by additional models or, over time, abandoned altogether, despite the stark and dramatic asymmetries that still exist in our governance structures. I then outline what the engagement model might look like, drawing on lessons learned from the July 2009 meeting. Finally, I lay out the numerous challenges that need to be overcome in order for the new approach to stimulate a thicker, more organic relationship between American and Russian civil societies that will benefit both governments and populations.

**Why Change?**

For nearly 20 years, the primary way in which American and Russian civil society have engaged one another, with support from the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), has been to bring cohorts of Americans to Russia to train and teach on various elements of democratic society and governance—including elections, political parties, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), independent media, and judiciaries. In the mid-1990s, I was part of that democracy assistance industry, working in Moscow for the National Democratic Institute on political party development. In the late 1990s, I ran a collaborative research project funded by the Carnegie Corporation investigating the impact of this type of assistance in Eastern Europe and Eurasia. Since 2001, I have been engaged in projects that helped introduce and build capacity for strategic communications and social marketing among the Russian human rights community.
As we approach the 20th anniversary of the dismantling of the Berlin Wall and in two years, the collapse of the Soviet Union, U.S. decisionmakers and practitioners are debating privately whether the era of “assistance” to Russia should end, be modified, or continue. While some efforts have spawned lasting organic and sustainable relationships, and others have perhaps planted seeds that will later develop under auspicious conditions, the cumulative effect of democracy assistance is increasingly recognized as minimal. The evidence, for example, that U.S. democracy assistance has expanded the capacity of many important actors in Russian civil society to affect the lives of their local populations is unclear. By 2009, even liberal Russians, let alone Kremlin insiders, are arguing that many of the programs appear ineffective, inefficient, and in some cases, unwelcome.

There are undoubtedly numerous reasons for the marginal impact of such assistance, including the vast size of Russia and the sharp decline in technical assistance dollars allocated over the last decade. Local activist cultures that prioritized principle over pragmatism, or shunned innovation,
may also have played a role. Obviously, the intense negative political pressure from Russian government officials in recent years has made the enterprise of assistance additionally challenging. Yet even with all the money in the world and zero political obstacles, the impact of these dollars would likely have been affected by yet another, largely unexamined, factor; a break in the supply-demand chain. In Russia, the supply by the democracy assistance industry has become (or has increasingly revealed itself to be) disconnected from the demands of the local population—both in terms of the issues it has focused on and the manner in which it has been delivered. Some experts will undoubtedly argue that this has always been the case, while others will argue that assistance should be provided regardless of the population’s desires—if one finds activists willing to engage in certain types of work, no matter how unpopular, then they ought to be supported. Still others may argue that assistance has evolved over the years, lessons have been learned, and the break in the supply-demand chain mischaracterizes current efforts. At least on an anecdotal level, however, judging from the response to the CSS in July 2009, the observation about the supply-demand disconnect seems to resonate with leaders from a wide swath of Russian civil society. They repeatedly rejected what in their view was seen as a paternalistic model positioning them as recipients of aid and instead advocated for equal partnerships in the design and delivery of projects.

The cumulative evidence suggests that the era of American trainers going to Russia and regarding Russia as a problem to be fixed by the United States should now largely come to an end. At the same time, leaving Russian civil society in not-so-splendid isolation, cutting off ties, technical assistance, or philanthropy, would be detrimental to U.S. and Russian interests. Instead, the era of “assistance” ought to give way, over time if not swiftly, to one of peer-to-peer engagement. Priority for engagement and support ought to go to those issues Russians want supported. Programming, whether public or private dollars, ought to be driven by data from reputable public opinion surveys, such as those fielded by the Levada Analytic Center, that indicate what Russians want addressed and how they think about the issues. Alternatively, civil society leaders need to

also the amounts allocated versus the population size: $10 million in assistance for “Rule of Law and Human Rights” in Russia (population 141 million); $213 million in assistance for these issues in Afghanistan (population 33 million); $12 million in assistance for these issues in Kosovo (population approximately 2 million). Freedom House, Making Its Mark: An Analysis of the Obama Administration FY2010 Budget Request for Democracy and Human Rights (Washington, D.C.: Freedom House, July 1, 2009), http://www.freedomhouse.org/uploads/FY2010BudgetAnalysis.pdf.


Results from nearly a dozen large, random sample surveys conducted in Russia by CSIS since 2001, examining the views and experiences of literally thousands of Russians, suggest that Russians view foreign support to combat human rights abuses, repair environmental damage, and address health crises, for example, as neutral or positive. Similarly, the data and focus groups suggest wariness regarding outside
make a solid case to donors for programs they want to propose that serve the interests of a specific underserved constituency but that fail to resonate with the larger Russian population. Either way, the era of programming that is driven by top-down processes in Washington ought to stop. Russian nonprofits, just like nonprofits the world over, will need continued support. The issues addressed here concern the modalities of that support.

Why Now?

A number of political and economic factors suggest a new approach is especially timely. Over the last several months, as the Obama administration has explored resetting the relationship with the Russian administration, we have seen some positive correlation in how the Russian authorities relate to civil society. These changes have been mainly rhetorical in nature, but rhetoric matters in Russia. Specifically, President Dmitri Medvedev’s first interview as president in a newspaper was with *Novaya gazeta*, an independent source of information and investigative journalism that has seen four reporters killed in recent years, including Anna Politkovskaya. He reconvened and met with the Presidential Council on Human Rights, populated by those widely regarded as genuine human rights defenders. He used the council to launch a review of the NGO law that has been so vilified since its adoption in 2006. While the results are by no means as comprehensive as many would have liked, on June 17, 2009, Medvedev submitted a revised law to the Duma. On the list of small promising signs of change, we can add the neutral and even positive engagement by some Russian authorities with activists at the CSS in July 2009, although President Medvedev declined to attend. Even so, it is hard to imagine organizing such a meeting just two years ago without negative Russian government interference. While there may have been concerns on the part of some in the Kremlin about the nature of the meeting, as a co-convener, I am not aware of any interference in terms of topics discussed or participants invited.

Indeed, the recent rhetoric and actions contrast with the starkly negative developments documented since 1999, where numerous senior Russian officials have castigated human rights, foreign assistance, and the nongovernmental community. That rhetoric helped generate the hostile and often dangerous, sometimes lethal, atmosphere in which activists and journalists engage of political parties and elections. Moreover, these data point, in some cases dramatically, to issues the public feels very strongly about, such as police abuse, human trafficking, and the violent hazing that goes on in the army. The surveys were conducted by the author together with the Levada Analytic Center and Theodore P. Gerber of the University of Wisconsin at Madison and supported by a variety of grants from public and private sources. For numerous publications that address the findings, see CSIS Human Rights and Security Initiative, Human Rights in Russia Publications, http://csis.org/program/human-rights-russia-publications.

continue to live and work in Russia. The recent kidnapping and murder of Memorial’s prized human rights researcher, Natalya Estemirova, and of nine other journalists, lawyers, and activists since January 2009, demonstrates vividly that the culture of impunity exists along with the current changes in rhetoric.

Will those who want to thwart whatever changes appear to be afoot succeed? During the lead-up to the July summit and in dozens of subsequent e-mails and conversations with human rights colleagues, we have considered this possibility. Among key civil society actors and within the Obama administration, there is, however, a growing consensus that the best response for now is to act as if Medvedev’s gestures do signal a shift. The “as if” stance is practiced even by those who have previously experienced pressure by the Russian authorities.

Dire global economic pressures also necessitate that public and private donors reassess how and in what ways they support civil society organizations. In both the United States and Russia, independent of politics, nonprofits, NGOs, media outlets, and other critical parts of civil society ought to be engaged in similar discussions: How are we to survive? What are the implications of this economic crisis, and what strategies are there for remaining viable? What does philanthropic

12 Recall the statement by Vladimir Putin in summer 1999 during an interview with Komsomolskaya pravda on the “problem” of foreign assistance for environmental groups and linking that somehow with employment in foreign intelligence services; that rhetoric then resulted in many environmental groups being investigated and harassed by the security services. Aleksandr Gamov and Yevgenia Uspenskogo, “Vladimir Putin: Gosudarstvennii perevorot Rossi ne grozit” (Russia is not in danger of a coup d’état), Komsomolskaya Pravda, July 8, 1999, pp. 8–9. For details see Sarah E. Mendelson, “Russians’ Rights Imperiled: Has Anybody Noticed?” International Security 26, no. 4 (Spring 2002): 39–69.


14 For a different perspective see Nikolai Petrov, who argues “I do not see any liberal actions from the president. I see liberal sayings, but these are not at all turning into actions,” as cited in Albina Kovalyova, “Who Is to Judge? Experts See Medvedev’s New Initiative as a Step toward Tighter Presidential Control of the Judiciary,” Russian Profile, May 13, 2009.

support look like in a world where nonprofit organizations can disappear in 24 hours because of financial scandal—such as the JEHT Foundation in New York? Many foundations have experienced tremendous losses in assets. As a result, the Ford Foundation is closing two overseas offices in September 2009, including in Moscow, that have provided support internationally to civil society groups for 15 years. Indeed, as donors and governments assess their programs, consideration ought to be given to the substantial gaps that will emerge in the next few years by the loss of donors such as the Ford Foundation, as well as government agencies such as the Swedish International Development Agency (SIDA) and the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA). Millions of dollars in support, in particular for the human rights community, will no longer be available.

Finally, other catalytic moments at play concern the arrival of a new U.S. administration and the introspection in the United States relating to the previous administration’s policies. It has long been recognized that counterterrorism policies, and specifically the treatment of detainees and torture, have cost the United States much in terms of reputation and have damaged the U.S. ability to promote democracy abroad effectively. Less often recognized, these policies have also undercut whatever leverage and effectiveness U.S. decisionmakers and diplomats had to push back on authoritarian policies adopted by the Putin administration. At its worst, American departures from the rule of law may have enabled abuse inside Russia. They certainly left human rights defenders isolated. Therefore, in addition to closing Guantánamo and ending torture, the Obama administration needs to assess how best going forward it can support human rights defenders and other parts of civil society struggling for the rule of law and democracy.

The combination of these events has brought us to a rare critical juncture—new administrations in Russia and the United States coupled with a possible restart of the relationship, the economic crisis, the Obama administration’s strategic rethink of assistance, and our own self-examination in terms of who we are—that ought to prompt reflection concerning how best to engage the outside

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17 According to SIDA, funding for work in Russia is less than it has been in years, and there are plans to end the work. CSIS staff, telephone conversation with SIDA staff, August 17, 2009. According to a CIDA program manager for Russia, CIDA will end all programming by March 2010. CSIS staff, telephone conversation with CIDA staff, August 17, 2009.


world on democracy and human rights and lead to an improvement in how American and Russian civil societies engage one another. Below I offer one answer as to how best to do this in Russia based in part on the experience of the CSS in July 2009.

The model proposed here is not meant as a new global one. The accumulated research on development, my own included, suggests there is no one-size-fits-all approach. Moreover, regional stratification in Russia—from Moscow’s fashionable center to the poverty and violence of the North Caucasus—is substantial, necessitating diverse approaches for specific areas. At the same time, in a country like Russia, where the per capita income averages between $12,000 and $16,000—greater than in Turkey and in Chile—even in the midst of a serious economic crisis, we can talk reasonably about a model in which members of civil society are coming together to address common, joint problems and to learn from one another how best to cope with lack of policy implementation and, in some cases, noncompliance with the rule of law. When engaging such a highly educated, mobile population that has moved largely beyond the Soviet era, we ought to shift our approach or, at the very least, develop multiple approaches. One that ought to attract investment from public and private donors involves harnessing our own robust civil society and shifting to a model that is premised on engagement, sharing of best practices, and where it makes sense, joint projects and periodic dialogue.

The Civil Society Summit, July 2009

Together with colleagues from the Eurasia Foundation and the New Eurasia Foundation, we organized what was essentially an experiment, pulled together in less than 70 days, after President Obama and President Medvedev first met in London on April 1, 2009. While the July presidential summit had arms control and reduction as a central topic, many colleagues and I were anxious that this meeting address not just security issues or government relations. Most important, we determined that there was interest among Russian civil society leaders, and particularly among the human rights community, for exploring the possibility of a new approach concerning U.S. and Russian civil society. Various Russian colleagues, apart and separate from the co-conveners in Moscow, had been circulating ideas on how to make U.S.-Russian civil society relations more robust.

While the Eurasia Foundation, the New Eurasia Foundation, and the CSIS Human Rights and Security Initiative are very different entities with different functions, goals, and sources of support, as co-conveners, we all shared the desire to use the occasion in July to explore what sorts of activities might make U.S.-Russian nongovernmental cooperation more meaningful to ordinary citizens, more diverse, more reciprocal, and more sustainable. We wanted to see whether there was general support to shift from the model of “assistance” as it has been constructed since

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the early 1990s to a new era of “engagement,” where groups come together, generate organic agendas, and address problems that confront both societies. We wanted also to explore the potential for building the social capital and entrepreneurship needed to survive this economic crisis. Our goal was to discuss these issues over two days in order to assess if there might be a potential to either grow joint work or simply to develop a dialogue around a few lines of work.

We convened a relatively small group of about 75 civil society leaders and analysts, all from the nongovernmental sector. What made our July meeting different from previous gatherings was that the majority of the American participants worked on issues and problems here at home, and they were coming together with Russians who worked on issues and problems in Russia. Participants in the meeting were recognized experts in their respective fields, who had helped shape national or international debates or policy outcomes on relevant issues through research, media appearances, or advocacy or had engaged in work addressing issues relevant to their own country and in some cases affected government policies. These included:

- Practitioners who work on noninfectious disease and maternity health coming to meet with counterparts;
- Experts from the community development and affordable housing field exploring possible common challenges;
- Human rights activists who have led efforts in the United States to end torture, detention without charge, and close Guantánamo engaging their counterparts from the Russian human rights community;
- Working journalists discussing new media and possibly sharing content; and
- Experts on higher education exploring how to make sure next generations in both countries are knowledgeable about one another and how to integrate universities better into local communities.

We recognized that the breadth of civil society in both countries was not represented at our July meeting. Our ability to tap into that richness was limited by time and resources, with many participants paying part or all of their own costs. As a first effort, we were drawn to lines of work that we knew (from survey work) had resonance in Russia, that we estimated would prove most promising in terms of future outcomes, or were most challenging for both countries and where civil society had a particular role to play, especially in light of the economic climate.

I would argue that the most important conclusion from the meeting was the widespread interest from a solid majority of the Russian colleagues across the board—not surprisingly from Russian government officials who came to the second day of the meeting, but also from the country’s leading human rights activists—who openly welcomed the new peer-to-peer approach.21

21 An important dissenter to the approach was Sergei Kovalev, former Soviet dissident, who in public and private interventions during the CSS argued against the shift to peer-to-peer engagement because President
Moreover, the interest expressed during the meeting by some Russian government officials, such as the head of the Presidential Council on Human Rights, Ella Pamfilova, and the ombudsman for human rights, Vladimir Lukin, as well as President Obama’s own engagement, and his personal connection deriving from his previous work as a community organizer, served as important validations. They suggest that the new approach is worth exploring in more detail. The specific suggestions for work going forward that came from the two days of discussion have been made public, and I leave it to others to debate the merits of the suggestions put forward. Below, I want to address the challenges involved in solidifying and scaling up the effort so that one day this civil society relationship might move from an ad hoc, elite-driven one to a more institutionalized and publicly supported one.

**Next Steps**

A year from now, what might this new approach of engagement look like? How can we go from a summit–related Moscow meeting in July 2009 to a series of projects that address concerns in both countries? The structure I suggest here is notional; I offer it as a template and encourage others to develop additional models or approaches.

**Advisory Committee**

In order to truly depart from the assistance model, we need a decentralized structure that engages Americans outside Washington and Russians outside Moscow—although one that does not exclude those who live in the capital cities. At the core of this structure, we might convene an advisory committee composed of cochairs from the various lines of work. Initially perhaps this committee should include people who came to the meeting in July 2009 who are particularly enthusiastic to work through next steps, but it might also include those who were unable to attend but are especially interested in a new approach to U.S.-Russian relations. Early on, such an Obama was freely elected and President Medvedev was not. Until that fact changed, he maintained, there can be no real peer-to-peer engagement. His interventions were met with some dismay and even anger by others in the Russian human rights movement who generally felt that that view led everyone back to the approach that many assess as unsuccessful after nearly 20 years. This view was also articulated by some American and Russian participants in the May 2009 discussion at the Brookings Institution.

22 See “U.S.-Russia Civil Society Summit Final Report,” Eurasia Foundation, Washington, D.C., September 2009, http://www.eurasia.org/programs/civilsocietysummit.aspx. Since the meeting in Moscow, those working on community development in the United States have made tentative plans to engage their Russian counterparts later this fall. Members of the human rights communities in both countries are presently announcing the establishment of a U.S.-Russia Civil Dialogue that will provide a nongovernmental parallel to the Civil Society Working Group, part of the official U.S.-Russia Bilateral Presidential Commission that was announced in July 2009. Members of the public health groups are also in discussion over potential projects emerging from the CSS.
advisory committee might engage members of the U.S. Congress and the Russian Duma to inform them of this potential new approach.

The ideal cochairs for each working group are representatives from U.S. and Russian organizations that come together as peers and that have the ability to reach back into their local communities. It bears repeating, since it is a new model: the two basic criteria for participation more generally ought to be (1) employment in the nongovernmental sector in either country and (2) part of the work that participants do on a daily basis involves working to solve challenges in their own country. That is, this effort should be mainly for Americans who work on the United States coming together with Russians who work on Russia in the nongovernmental sector. As a planning exercise sometime this fall or early winter, this advisory committee might meet virtually on-line or convene physically in the United States or Russia to plan next steps.

**Civil Society Forum**

The advisory committee might envision and plan for a larger meeting of civil society groups coming together in the United States in summer 2010 as a civil society forum with representatives from different parts of American and Russian civil society engaging in a multipronged series of projects. If a forum in 2010 came together, it could be the platform on which to grow a stronger U.S.-Russian relationship that includes and engages citizens, not just the political leaders.

Instead of six working groups, such a forum might expand to include 25 or more working groups and convene perhaps at an American university, such as the University of Wisconsin or the University of Washington—both of which have strong research centers on Russia and have facilities that can host an international meeting. General support from the U.S. government for such a meeting ought to be forthcoming. Alternatively, the advisory committee might choose to consolidate or deepen the relationship of the working groups that met in Moscow in July 2009 and add perhaps only one or two more, with plans to scale up gradually over time.\(^23\)

The forum ought to convene independently of U.S.-Russian official government business but ought to have formal engagement when appropriate with the respective governments, either during presidential summits, through high-level visits of government officials, or possibly through the Lavrov-Clinton commission that was announced during the July 2009 summit.\(^24\) In other

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\(^{23}\) An advisory committee might create an Internet site where additional ideas and groups might apply or submit their ideas.

\(^{24}\) Some of the July 2009 CSS participants have publicly registered concern that the Russian cochair, Vladislav Surkov, named by the Kremlin to cochair the civil society working group on the Lavrov-Clinton commission, has a long track record of hostile engagement with Russian civil society and the West. This commission may emerge as an unsuitable entity with which to engage. See Reuters, “NGO Anger at Putin Ally’s Role on U.S.-Russia Body,” July 9, 2009, http://www.rferl.org/content/NGO_anger_at_Putin_allys_role_on_USRussia_body/1773066.html.
words, the forum ought to stand by itself but also engage, as was the case in Moscow, with authorities in both countries.

**Joint Projects**

While the ultimate projects and modalities going forward need to be derived and produced by civil society actors in both countries, I offer this list as examples of what might be pursued.

- **Next-Generation Education:** There are several levels of next-generation programs that might be developed. One might involve teachers from elementary schools who generate twinning programs that bring sixth-grade classrooms (or perhaps older grades) together through the Internet, with plans to meet in one country in summer 2010 and the other country in summer 2011. Students might also be involved in raising funds to help make their trips possible. Russian and American filmmakers might be invited to make documentaries of these meetings. Another twinning program might involve exchange visits and be geared toward high school students to explore each country’s history or to build on existing blogs such as “Commonweal” (http://commonweal.blogspot.com), which explores social capital in innovative ways. Finally, American and Russian university professors might build joint programs that ensure the continued development of centers of excellence on Russia in the United States and develop centers of excellence on the United States in regional universities throughout Russia. These centers would host programs and exchanges exploring comparative political development, history, and literature, serving as resources for course and curriculum development. These centers of excellence might be an appropriate rotating host for future civil society forums.

- **Human Rights and Rule of Law:** Representatives from groups such as Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International USA, Human Rights First, Freedom House, and other organizations that address human rights issues in the United States might come together with representatives from a wide variety of Russian organizations such as the Moscow Helsinki Group, Memorial, and others as they did in July 2009 and develop subgroups around common themes such as human trafficking, migration, or hate crimes. Representatives from human rights groups might explore communication strategies and policy recommendations, especially in light of the financial crisis and increased immigration. They might engage in joint research assessing how the U.S. and Russian populations view human rights, law, and the work of NGOs and engage in efforts to expand the demand for human rights in both the United States and Russia, thus broadening constituencies. The Americans might explore the idea of developing a Presidential Council on Human Rights, borrowing from the Russian model. The Presidential Councils might meet periodically.

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25 The U.S. Department of Education funds several “Title VI National Resource Centers for Russia and East/Central Europe.” For a current list, see http://www.crees.ku.edu/links/NRCs.shtml#II.
New Media: American and Russian journalists might come together to plan a series of joint media projects and to share content so that informed coverage of each society continues despite the cuts to the media business in both countries. These would be opportunities for independent news organizations to leverage their reach. The projects might include Web-based new media such as Foreign Policy coming together with Caucasian Knot or sharing radio packages with National Public Radio and Ekho Moskvy or editorials from the Washington Post and Vedomosti. They might also encompass social media projects such as LiveJournal, Facebook, or PRX (the public radio exchange).

Public Health: At least two different approaches emerged from the July 2009 meeting that might be explored going forward: (1) experts who work on prevention strategies and in particular the use of strategic communication to shift behaviors and attitudes among vulnerable populations concerning public health; and (2) experts who work on specific medical interventions to tackle noninfectious disease. Future projects might explore programs and strategies that recognize the health challenges both countries share and that can harness the strengths and talents of both sides in tackling alcoholism, ending smoking, increasing the use of seatbelts, ending drunken driving, or improving maternity health.

Community Development: American affordable housing practitioners have pioneered international peer-to-peer engagement with civil society counterparts from other countries. One of the groups sponsoring such exchanges—the Housing Partnership Network (HPN), which took part in the CSS—has invited some Russian participants to attend its annual meeting in San Francisco in December 2009. Through HPN’s meeting, as well as engagement with other American community development practitioners, this collaboration might result in the development of ideas with Russian counterparts on future work addressing, for example, best practices concerning housing management and maintenance, housing rehabilitation, energy efficiency, rental housing development, and the needs of communities in one-factory towns devastated by plant closings. The community development working group also raised the possibility of connecting nonprofits for more focused peer exchanges on a wide range of topics including best practices concerning housing.

Environment: American and Russian environmental organizations might come together to solve some specific environmental issues related to climate change or explore how local campaigns to increase environmental standards have evolved and worked. They might alternatively engage additional stakeholders in their respective localities on these issues, reaching out, for example, to local government.

History and Memory: Russian and American historians, social scientists, and graduate students might engage in joint research exploring “blank spots” from their respective pasts. In the United States, these might include the legacies of slavery and the treatment of indigenous peoples, and in Russia, it might include the legacies of “terror” and the institutionalization of deportations and slave labor in the gulag. It might examine how these issues are presented to the public in each country, for example, through a comparison of textbooks, tourism,
movies, and popular novels. Alternatively, it might focus on specific aspects of shared history, such as World War II.  

- **Domestic Violence**: The United States and Russia are home to important organizations combating domestic violence. Some international engagement has occurred in the past, but this effort would bring together activists to share best practices and develop national action plans to educate and engage male family members and corporate sponsors in combating domestic violence.

**Outcomes**

Out of these and other lines of work, working groups, joint projects, and civil society forums, we ought to see participants engage with one another, the governments, and the public at large in some combination of the following:

- Produce specific requests and recommendations to each government on an issue for which greater governmental engagement or capacity is needed;
- Generate solutions to a problem that does not require government support and that U.S. and Russian NGOs can address themselves;
- Share best practices and lessons learned among themselves; and/or
- Engage in listening tours, visiting several cities in each country and engaging in outreach to local publics, well beyond Washington and Moscow.

**Remaining Challenges**

As noted above, over the two days of discussion in Moscow, Russian representatives of civil society—from the fields of community development to human rights—articulated a shared desire to shift how representatives of civil society engage one another, ending the years of Americans coming to Russia talking and teaching about the rule of law and other elements of democracy. For the most part, we heard a genuine desire to move to a different dynamic—one of peer-to-peer engagement. That said, there are numerous obstacles and questions that will need to be answered in order to shift from assistance to engagement.

Chief among the obstacles are what we referred to rather vaguely throughout the CSS as the “asymmetries” that exist between our civil societies. Just over a week after we met with President Obama, the asymmetries were laid bare (once again) as a representative from Memorial, Natasha

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Estemirova, was kidnapped and murdered in Chechnya. It is a central and painful fact that we need to address together with Russian colleagues: How can we make this shift meaningful if our peers are routinely disappeared and murdered, with their killers free to walk the streets? How do we engage as peers if one community exists with a working justice system and the other community exists in a culture of impunity? What does it mean to work together when colleagues on one side live with death threats, while the others have no fear of persecution?

I cannot offer satisfactory answers to these seminal questions other than to say that, left unchallenged, the culture of impunity in Russia threatens the entire reset of U.S.-Russian relations as well as this particular nongovernmental aspect. At the same time, it is clear that the nearly 20 years of American teaching and training has not helped address or alter these existing asymmetries. If anything, they have grown worse over time. One request from Russian human rights colleagues is to convene a meeting in the United States on how the American civil rights movement handled threats in the 1950s and 1960s. While that ought to happen, the causal root of the asymmetries, however, cannot be addressed solely or even mainly by those in civil society. This shift from impunity requires a major push at the policy level in the United States, in Europe, and most of all, in Russia.

Asymmetries aside, how will this new approach be paid for? How much will it cost? In the near term, this approach would surely be modest compared to the $29 million the Obama administration is spending on democracy assistance in FY2009. Would it result over the long term in fewer dollars for Russian organizations? If that happened, how would they survive? These and other financial issues need to be addressed by public and private donors. For example, there are long-awaited moneys, likely well over $100 million, from the U.S.-Russia Investment Fund to be distributed through a separate entity, the U.S.-Russia Foundation for Economic Advancement and Rule of Law. What projects emerging from the July 2009 meeting or additional civil society forums might be supported by these funds?

Specific lines of work might attract specific donors supporting, for example, the public health dimension or the community development aspects. There might be local funds from governments in the United States that go to support local NGOs in the United States in their engagement with Russian counterparts, especially if viewed as having cultural or educational benefits to the local U.S. population. There ought to be a public component to all the work done, where visiting Russian civil society representatives are hosted in various American towns and vice versa, engaging in public meetings. This entire effort, however, will be viewed as unsuccessful if donors gravitate only or mainly to those issues they think are sanctioned by the Russian government and shy away from other areas, such as human rights—issues that the Russian public does want addressed, and are in the U.S. national interest to support.

If U.S. government programs shift from the assistance model to the engagement one, it will ultimately require support from high-level Obama administration officials and will require a bureaucratic adjustment inside the U.S. government. There are numerous equities involved, and years of experience that need to be harnessed so that the cohort of democracy assistance experts in and around Washington can be mobilized to work with Russian civil society in a more targeted and responsive manner. Most fundamental will be persuading those individuals and organizations outside government who have benefited from and have been part of the democracy assistance community, who have fought long and hard to support Russian colleagues, to be allies of this new effort. These individuals and organizations might need, in some cases, to expand their portfolios so that they develop expertise on American organizations, strategies, and tactics and can reach back into relevant communities working in the United States.

There will be times when civil society leaders in both countries are simply overwhelmed with the daily work in which they are engaged, particularly in an economic crisis, and adding an additional aspect—engaging counterparts in another country—will seem far-fetched. Establishing why and how it is in the institutional interest of each organization to engage in shared work, or meet periodically, will be an important aspect in making this new approach real and sustainable. Based on the July 2009 CSS, the challenge, in the midst of the economic crisis, of finding interested Americans, who do not work on Russia, to engage Russian counterparts proved to be largely nonexistent.

Finally, this entire effort is premised on a more constructive and stable political relationship between the United States and Russia. There are many people who will view this approach with suspicion, who do not want to see a good relationship between the two countries develop, or simply who continue to view the United States or Russia as the enemy. The effort will also be complicated if the Obama administration reverses campaign promises and does not ultimately get our own house in order. Moreover, there will be moments and issues around which civil societies in both countries are pitted against their governments. The tolerance of governments to take criticism seriously and the ability of civil society actors to continue to engage responsibly with governments will be a test for all sides.

Despite these challenges and as yet unanswered questions, the interest and desire to engage one another in a new and different manner is worth exploring. U.S. and Russian national interests in the twenty-first century are best served not just by governments coming together but by our societies addressing problems and generating solutions from the bottom up. Our July 2009 experiment, the CSS, suggests there is a platform on which to build this new approach in U.S.-Russian civil society relations.