Evaluating Democracy Assistance to Eastern Europe and Eurasia

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Little is known--although much is believed--about the impact of democracy assistance on institutional development in Eastern Europe and Eurasia, carried out on a transnational level by Western non-governmental organizations (NGOs) with local political and social activists. A recently completed three year study at Columbia University was designed to address this gap. Its findings--that the impact has been decidedly mixed and that NGO strategies should be driven more by local context--are likely to rankle both supporters and critics of democracy assistance who have portrayed assistance as either overwhelmingly successful or largely irrelevant. Instead, the results of democracy assistance to the formerly communist states has been something in between.

The Columbia study points to the power and the limits of Western assistance. Instead of bloated budgets and ineffectiveness, the return for the relatively small investment has to date been noteworthy. As pundits engage in the "who lost Russia" debate at the same time that they await parliamentary and presidential elections, it should be noted that the ratio of economic assistance dollars to democracy assistance dollars was at one time as high as 8:1.

In brief, the study finds that if NGOs make important and significant adjustments to their approach to assistance, including paying systematic attention to local context, we can expect greater impact. If NGOs are unwilling to make changes, then their impact will be random and rare. Most important, those activists in Eastern Europe and Eurasia who support the development of democratic institutions will become increasingly marginalized.

Since the process of transition across the regions of Eastern Europe and Eurasia is so critical to peace and stability in Western Europe and the United States, the Columbia study recommends that policymakers place great importance on the critical evaluation of democracy assistance and create incentives--such as adequate funding--for NGOs that comply with specific recommendations.

Between Success and Failure

For those who support democracy assistance, there is some good news in the Columbia study. The findings suggest that Western NGOs have played a large and important role in

the design and building of institutions associated with democratizing states. Specifically, political parties, regular elections, independent media, and local NGOs are all now part of the political landscape in many states across East/Central Europe and Eurasia, and much of this is traceable to Western NGO efforts. In Russia and Ukraine, Western NGOs have had an impressive impact in presenting practical menus of problem-solving skills for elections (such as how to use research in designing a campaign or how to set up election monitoring efforts). In the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Russia, Western assistance has helped launch self-sustaining media organizations and support the creation of local commercially independent television stations. In Poland, Hungary and Russia, Western groups have been central to forming networks of women's organizations.

There is, however, also bad news. Western NGOs have had little impact on the operational nature of the institutions they helped to create. The institutions function poorly with extremely weak links to their own societies. For example, in Russia and Ukraine, Western NGOs have influenced the electoral activities of new political parties and the organization of media watch groups--but they have done little to help make parties more responsive to constituents or major media outlets more independent from the narrow political interests of owners. In Poland, Hungary and Russia, women's groups have mushroomed at the same time they have grown increasingly "ghettoized"--closer to their transnational partners than the constituents they are meant to represent or the governments they claim to be influencing.

Certainly the historical legacy of formerly communist states plays a role in the poor functioning of these institutions. Why should we expect after 74 years of communist rule and eight years of transition that it would be otherwise? But Western NGOs need to pay more attention to these historical legacies, spend more time cultivating local partners and do more to educate the public--both in the United States and abroad--about what democracy assistance can and cannot do.

The Importance of Being Local

Western NGOs have generally failed to strategize about the local context in which they work. Western NGOs have tended to rely on practitioners (social activists from the American Midwest, parliamentary staffers from Canada, campaigners from Britain) often with little knowledge of the region to implement strategies--blueprints for building democratic institutions--developed in Western capitals. Many organizations fall prey to a syndrome of "it seems to have worked somewhere, so let's try it elsewhere." At its worst, this syndrome utterly ignores local conditions: it worked in South Africa and Bulgaria, let's try it in Russia!

Blueprints can work reasonably well in the initial stages of democratization, when many locals and Westerners are focused on building or rebuilding specific institutions. Additionally, they seem to work better in those states rapidly democratizing and integrating with the international community, such as the Czech Republic and Poland. Assistance facilitates the transformation process, or serves as "more gas in an already

moving car," in the words of one observer. Moreover, what else can NGOs do if they rely mainly on experts with technical, and not regional or local expertise?

But Western NGOs are limited by this blueprint approach in countries undergoing later stages of democratization. The Columbia study documents how much of Eastern Europe and parts of the former Soviet Union are already at, or have long moved beyond, initial institution-building. Now, political environments and local cultures are changing as they are exposed to or incorporate new and different practices. Blueprints actually compete with local realities. In Ukraine, Western-funded TV stations crowded out some locally funded ones. In Russia, Hungary, and Poland, local NGOs responded first to Western donor's interests--the development of a network of feminists--rather than address the pressing issues that consume the lives of women in those countries. Western engagement with environmental groups in Kazakhstan and Russia has never adequately confronted the fundamental issues--industrial, economic and political--that drive environmental degradation.

For Western NGOs to impact the function of the institutions they helped build, they now must design and implement strategies that respond to the local context by systematically using local and regional expertise in addition to the practitioners. NGOs will have no trouble locating such experts. Given the difficult economic conditions, many locals would welcome the employment during European and American specialists' frequent trips to the regions.

The reasons for using local expertise are particularly compelling. Democracy assistance is intensely social work; it is based on relationships cultivated over time. While NGOs are encouraged and should attempt to reach a wide audience of activists, they are more likely to have an impact if they have good relations with a few key players. Local political entrepreneurs emerge as central to the success of Western assistance; they act as brokers through which Western NGOs interact with society. If Western groups have not strategized extensively about finding the best local partners to help make ideas salient, resonant and in some way complementary to the local political culture, they are hampered in their work. There is still a need for practical expertise, but those groups that match local and regional experts with practitioners are better able to respond to political and organizational contexts and develop informed strategies. In essence, Western NGOs need to pay greater attention to identifying their partners and understand that a main dynamic of effective assistance is an interactive one, not one of direct importation.

How Ideas Travel

In cases where new, Western ideas and practices in some way complement the organizational culture of a local group, activists are receptive to them. If ideas and practices help solve specific problems (such as increasing a candidate's electoral chances), local activists are also likely to adopt them. When ideas and practices appear to compete with local customs or beliefs, activists reject them based on what some scholars have called a "logic of appropriateness."

By the late 1990s, an additional dynamic has emerged. Ideas and practices do, on occasion, migrate beyond the specific local partners and organizations with which Western NGOs worked--that is, beyond groups that outsiders have identified as "good guys." New practices--from methods of campaigning, to media structures, to the organizing of civic advocacy groups--have spread across the political spectrum in many countries--to nationalists, communists, as well as "democrats." NGOs are now considered legitimate groups in parts of Central Asia. When a reformist party was temporarily banned (for political reasons) from participating in the December 1995 Russian Parliamentary election, all parties, including communists and nationalists, protested. The importance of crisis centers for domestic abuse and rape is recognized by many beyond the narrow circle of self-proclaimed feminists in Eastern Europe and Russia.

The spread of ideas and practices beyond the people and organizations with which Western NGOs work is an important, unexamined dynamic in assistance. It has received little attention in evaluations for political reasons; the United States Agency for International Development (US AID) and NGOs are loath to present Congress (which votes on the US AID budgets that fund many NGOs) with information that communists or nationalists have in any way benefited from or been affected by NGO efforts. The reality, however, is that if ideas and practices take hold, they usually do so in a way that encompasses a wide spectrum of political actors with varied commitments to democratization.

What Now?

Lessons from the experience of Western NGOs in Eastern Europe and Eurasia are hardly academic. If applied, they could help make transnational engagement more balanced (that is, truly transnational and less weighted towards outsiders) and more effective (that is, sustainable). If ignored, locals engaged in building democratic institutions will become more and more isolated in their own societies.

While NGOs are the agents of change needed to do this work, they should make critical adjustments in their strategies including drawing more on local ingredients rather than a global cookbook. The practice of applying blueprints used in Latin America to Russia or in West Africa to Uzbekistan does not help make new, fragile democratic institutions viable. Instead, policymakers and NGOs must be prepared for the appearance of as many different strategies and solutions as there are communities engaged in transformation. They must be ready for the reality that strategies and solutions will be developed on the ground and not in Western capitals. Funders can help in this: they ought to reward those NGOs that adjust their strategies.

This memo draws on the final report of the study by Sarah E. Mendelson and John K. Glenn, "Evaluating NGO Strategies for Democratization and Conflict Reduction in the

Formerly Communist States" (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, forthcoming, 1999).