

# **Supporting Democratic Institutions Rather than "democrats" in Russia**

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In the period leading up to Vladimir Putin's decisive victory in the first round of Russia's presidential election, individual personalities and not democratic institutions once more became the focus of analysis. This debate, reminiscent of Soviet era Kremlinology, neatly serves the purpose of those who argue that Russia has been lost because of inept policy initiatives. However, it obscures both the successes of US democracy assistance and the real problems that remain in constructing a new democratic political system in Russia.

A debate over personalities and psychological profiles is misleading and works against the logic of democracy--even emergent democracy. Democracy must be rooted in a consistent and fair set of institutions that provide incentives for political leaders to behave in accordance with democratic principles and sanction them if they do not. This basic premise provides a clear prescription for a more accurate appraisal of the current political reality and future policy initiatives.

A reassessment of democracy assistance's goals and strategy is critical in the wake of Vladimir Putin's election. Despite threats from anti-system parties and politicians, corruption, oligarchs, clans, voter frustration, and economic hardship, Russian politicians and activists with important aid from non-governmental organization (NGO) partners have built a formidable base of democratic institutions. Moreover, they continue to fill government offices through electoral processes. The question is how best to strengthen and expand this base to ensure Russian citizens control the officials they now elect. The answer lies in a renewed focus on building institutions rather than advantaging the position of democrats within those institutions.

## **The Benefits of an Institutional Strategy of Assistance**

A focus on institutional structures avoids a number of pitfalls that have plagued US democracy aid to Russia. A stress on nascent democratic groups may have been appropriate in earlier stages of Russia's transition; however, in the current context, the costs of this strategy now outweigh the benefits. An ideology-blind strategy of institution-building will yield both short- and long-term benefits toward democratic consolidation in Russia.

More specifically, an "institutions first" focus will provide the following advantages over the current stress on aiding democrats within institutions:

- give all participants an equal stake in enforcing rules and regulations;
- remove intractable problems of identifying democrats;
- avoid the danger of supporting politicians who consistently violate democratic norms;
- provide a clearer picture of Russian political conditions;
- promote institutional structures more in line with Russian reality; and
- incorporate and socialize opposition politicians into the existing political system.

### **The Case for Supporting Institution-Building**

A central message of democratic theory is that political actors agree to fight political battles by an open and predictable set of rules--not because they are assured of winning but because they do not risk being shot or jailed if they lose. Uncertainty about who will win an election, a vote on the floor of parliament, or a Supreme Court case is an unnerving but essential characteristic of democracy. Procedures are certain; outcomes are not.

One of the greatest dangers facing republican democracies--the personal ambition of leaders--is solved by institutional incentive structures that guide individual action consistent with these principles. The American founders recognized that healthy democracies cannot rely on the moral fortitude or good will of elected leaders. A web of institutions that controls the ambitions of individual leaders provides a solution to this dilemma. Institutions safeguard democracy regardless of who wins elections.

Analysts often refer to institutions that guide political behavior as "the state"--a shorthand that obscures the complexity of the institutional mosaic that guides political action. In Russia, institutional vestiges of the Soviet past still coexist with new political structures, and national and regional-level structures offer conflicting incentives to politicians. The assessment of both current conditions and future political initiatives requires careful sorting out of confusion and contradictions across the individual institutions that comprise the state.

The current situation illustrates the danger of overlooking these complexities. As fears of Putin's authoritarian personality increased, analysts' assessments of the Russian state moved from a focus on the state's weakness to a focus on its strength. In real terms, this shift was captured by a renewed focus on the Soviet Union's most enduring legacies: a durable set of coercive institutions epitomized by the FSB, the KGB's successor. Yet a strong police apparatus does not equal a strong state. Russian police agencies do retain

inordinate power, but this power is greatly enhanced by the relative weakness of the state institutions designed to hold them in check.

This shift in analytical focus drew attention away from the institutions that normally control the actions of coercive and policing agencies—such as elections, parties, parliaments, and civic interest organizations. These constraining institutions, virtually absent in the Soviet system, have been the intense focus of democracy assistance programs over a number of years. Strengthening these and other state institutions should remain a clear priority in US policy. In formulating future aid strategies, we must recognize problems in the way that these institutions function. But we must also recognize the tremendous progress that has been made. This progress, in conjunction with the transfer of power from Yeltsin to Putin, demands that advocates of democracy assistance step back and reassess strategies for promoting democratic consolidation. Most importantly, it is time to reassess a strategy that focuses on self-proclaimed democrats over institutions that provide opportunities for all political actors to participate and succeed or fail under the same rules.

### **Aiding Democracy Versus Aid to "democrats"**

The problem with the institutional solution to the democratic dilemma is that the same institutions that constrain individuals provide them opportunities to influence the policy process and subsequent constitutional arrangements. In nascent democracies where institutional structures are still weak, there is a strong danger that the winners in early rounds of elections will structure institutions to their own advantage, or subvert democracy altogether. In Russia, the fear of a Communist or nationalist victory led to tension between the strategy of building democratic institutions and the strategy of helping democrats succeed within those institutions. In large part, the latter strategy won out. But given the unintended and costly consequences of promoting democrats over universal institutions--and the persistence of Russia's electoral democracy despite all obstacles--it is time to change course.

The case of party-building aid is a good example. Rather than focus on creating transparency and accountability for all participants in the electoral process, institutionalizing the range of political debate, and establishing norms of behavior across the political spectrum, aid was concentrated on furthering the fate of parties deemed to be oriented toward democracy.

To a large extent, the strategy of betting on individuals over institutions has backfired. Democrats are often indistinguishable from their opponents and democratic parties have suffered with very authoritarian internal decision-making procedures. Arguably, Boris Yeltsin's democratic protégés pioneered the mechanisms of electoral control being exercised so adroitly by the Putin team. In reality, the idea that NGO resources could be targeted at democrats was naïve, given the fluidity in the party system. A number of activists trained by democracy assistance organizations played important roles in the Fatherland and Medved organizations in 1999. In some cases, US aid targeted to

individual regional candidates has become a hot campaign issue and a source of vulnerability for those candidates. All of these factors have undermined the real goal of party system formation: to forge durable ties between voters and their elected representatives.

Building party systems or building institutions in general means swallowing a huge dose of unpalatable contestants, including Communists and nationalists. However, the pay-off of an inclusive policy that focuses on institutions and not individuals is potentially very large. The best theory we have argues that good citizens are not born out of their ideas but by their active participation in the political system--from civic organizations to government service. Recent evidence from Latin America demonstrates that participation in party politics is an extremely effective tool of democratic socialization. Thus, focusing on building inclusive structures manifests real long-term benefits at the individual and organizational levels. Perhaps more importantly, democratic institutions foster cooperation among political elites if they want to win office, pass legislation, or rein in the bureaucracy. By stressing individuals over institutions in concrete policy prescriptions, it is possible to encourage cooperation in the political arena rather than individual defection.

Finally, thinking about institutions in terms of whether they push individuals to comply with democratic norms and cooperate in pursuit of political goals will yield structures more appropriate to the Russian context. As in the economic realm, the West has been quick to proffer institutional structures that conflict with other Russian structures or don't make sense given Russian realities such as the underdevelopment of societal organizations, the distribution of political resources, or center-regional relations. Finally, by dealing only with democrats in formulating strategies and policy advice, NGOs artificially alter perceptions of the political reality on which future policy is constructed. Communist and nationalist opposition is a reality in Russia. The best strategy for neutralizing these forces is incorporating them into the political process.

In the current Russian environment, an institution-building strategy is less risky than in earlier stages and will have a far greater pay-off. A mid-course correction will help democracy assistance organizations to reap the benefits that are due from ten years of hard work.

For more analysis of democracy assistance programs see the study "Evaluating Democracy Assistance and the Reduction of Ethnic Conflict in Post-Communist States," funded by the Carnegie Corporation and available on the internet at [www.ceip.org/programs/democr/NGOs/index.html](http://www.ceip.org/programs/democr/NGOs/index.html)