

Bolstering Exchange Programs to Link University Education with Liberal Views in Russia

A DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVE ON “DEMOCRACY ASSISTANCE”

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Efforts by the United States to promote democracy and civil society in Russia by directly supporting institutions such as political parties, nongovernmental organizations, alternative media outlets, and opposition groups have reached a critical juncture. The Russian government’s recent crackdown on foreign-funded NGOs, restrictions on the internet, and pressure on opposition leaders appear to be supported by the population. Anti-American sentiment within the Russian public is considerably stronger than is support for the opposition.¹ With little to show for nearly two decades of expensive democracy assistance, the United States should abandon its previous approach. Instead, it should adopt a new strategy focused on creating a normative demand for democracy and human rights in that part of the Russian population that should, theoretically, be most inclined to support those ideals: university graduates. Without robust local demand among university graduates for democracy and human rights, efforts to build institutions will not succeed. U.S. support for such institutions is probably counterproductive, as it plays into the hands of pro-Kremlin critics. Therefore, democracy assistance resources should be redirected toward dramatically increasing the quantity and quality of university exchange programs and other initiatives that bring Russian and U.S. students into close and sustained contact.

¹ Levada Center polling data: 72% of Russians see the United States an “aggressor that’s trying to take over the world” while only 7% see the United States as “a defender of peace, democracy, and order throughout the world” ([Levada](#)); 43% of Russians support the protest movement advocating free elections while 47% oppose the movement ([Levada](#)).

Democracy Assistance to Russia

Although the levels and specific targets of funding have ebbed and flowed, since the collapse of the Soviet Union the U.S. government has invested considerable resources in democracy assistance to Russia. According to a 2009 report by the U.S. Government Accountability Office, Russia was the sixth largest recipient of democracy assistance funding from the U.S. government in fiscal years 2006-2008, with nearly \$100 million allocated by the U.S. Agency for International Development, the State Department's Bureau of Democracy Rights and Labor, and the National Endowment for Democracy.² Over half of USAID funding (the bulk of democracy assistance) went to "civil society programs," a distinctively high amount (more typically, most democracy assistance funding goes to good governance programs).³

Russian critics of foreign democracy assistance characterize these efforts as U.S. government attempts to meddle in Russia's domestic political affairs. This argument appears to resonate with Russians, judging by the widespread support for recent legislation requiring Russian political NGOs who receive foreign funds to publicly designate themselves as "foreign agents." Whether one believes that U.S.-based democracy assistance in Russia is driven by a genuine commitment to the spread of democracy or by more instrumental goals, the fact is that the investments have not created sustainable institutions: without foreign financial support, few political NGOs and similar groups will survive. Supporters of the current approach can complain that the Russian government has itself created conditions inimical to the independent flourishing of these organizations, not least by persistently labeling them as agents of U.S. interests that seek to foster instability or "color revolution" in Russia. But it seems unlikely that the civil society institutions supported by two decades of U.S. democracy assistance have generated sufficient interest in, and support for, their activities among the Russian public to allow them to continue operating in the absence of foreign funding. The strategy of investing in democratic and civil society institution-building was based on the incorrect assumption of an inherent organic demand for civil rights and democratic institutions on the part of Russians.

The Missing Link between University Education and Democratic Norms in Russia

One reason many assumed that the Russian public wanted democracy and civil society is its high proportion of university graduates. The idea that university graduates are particularly likely to support civic and democratic values is a staple claim of political sociology, evident in classic works by Seymour Lipset and Gabriel Almond (as co-authors) and Sidney Verba. Higher education purportedly broadens the outlook of individuals, opening them to the wide spectrum of experiences, interests, and values in complex modern societies, giving them a sense of their own political efficacy, and encouraging them to advocate for political institutions that protect their rights to articulate, aggregate, and organize in pursuit of their interests. In Russia, survey-based

² United States Government Accountability Office. Report to Congressional Committees: DEMOCRACY ASSISTANCE. September 2009, p. 46.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

studies in the late Soviet period indicated university graduates were more supportive of *glasnost* and *perestroika*, confirming an argument from the late 1960s that the highly educated were likely to chafe under Soviet-style political strictures.

However, the lack of strong support for civil and human rights norms within the Russian public reflects the low levels of support for them among university graduates. A significant body of survey research has shown that Russian university graduates scarcely differ, if at all, from their less educated compatriots in their outlook on questions pertaining to support for democracy.

Consider several examples from surveys commissioned in recent years by the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), with funding from USAID and the Ford Foundation. In a 2010 survey of 2,009 20-to-59 year-olds, 23 percent of university graduates and non-graduates alike agreed that protecting freedoms of expression, association, and thought should be a “top priority” of the Russian government. The overall level of support for prioritizing civil liberties is up from earlier in the decade but still only shared by less than one quarter of Russia’s population, and there was no variation by university degree. In a 2005 survey of 2,000 young Russian adults, only 21 percent of higher-educated respondents said that the Orange Revolution was good for Ukraine, versus 23 percent of those without a higher education degree; graduates of higher education were also more likely to say that it was bad for Ukraine (35 vs. 29 percent). Combining that survey with a 2007 survey of 1,802 respondents in the same age group, higher-educated respondents were somewhat more likely to agree that “democracy is always the best form of government”; however, fewer than half agreed (43 vs. 38 percent of non-graduates of higher education). Graduates of higher education were also more likely to agree – by a larger margin – with another statement in the same question: “sometimes authoritarian rule is preferable to democracy” (43 vs. 34 percent). In these surveys, the higher educated were equally likely as those without higher-educational degrees to agree that “foreigners fund NGOs only in order to meddle in our affairs” (62 percent), only slightly less likely to agree that “overall, Stalin did more good than bad” (53 vs. 55 percent), and equally likely to agree that the best form of government for Russia is “pure democracy, with no authoritarian elements” (24 percent). They were also equally or more likely to express hostility or fear toward a range of ethnic, national, and religious groups, including Americans.

These findings are particularly telling because the university graduates in the 2005 and 2007 surveys all completed their studies during the post-Soviet era. The weak or absent positive association between higher education and support for democratic government obtain in surveys of the general population conducted earlier in the 2000s. The examples illustrate that higher education in Russia has not had the democratizing impact observed in most other countries. As a result, there is no constituency in Russia favoring the pro-democratic civil society institutions supported by U.S. democracy assistance, which has been engaged in a futile task of bolstering institutions in which the Russian population has little interest.

Explaining the Missing Link between University Education and Democratic Values

There are several possible explanations for the evident lack of support for traditional democratic and human rights norms on the part of Russian university graduates. Russian higher education graduates may expect to hold elite positions in society and therefore embrace the values of the political elite. The discrediting of “democracy” during the economic turmoil of the 1990s may have been especially strong for the university educated, given the relatively high economic suffering of professionals.

But the most likely cause is the “technocratic” approach that Russian higher education inherited from the Soviet era. The Soviet regime explicitly sought to produce university graduates who were technically skilled but narrowly specialized in their field of study. This philosophy was hardly unique to the Soviet system, but it was institutionalized more thoroughly there than elsewhere. Prospective university students had to choose a field of study before even applying, and their entire course of study was geared toward classes in that specialty. Rather than encourage critical thinking and writing skills, Soviet pedagogical practice emphasized memorization and mastery of facts. In contrast, the “liberal” approach to higher education emphasizes exposure to a broad range of disciplines and schools of thought; the development of analytical skills, creativity, and originality of thought; and a willingness to challenge received wisdoms. Nothing about the technocratic form of higher education would be expected to produce the democratic and civic orientation associated theoretically with higher education, which in fact assumes a classic “liberal” approach to instruction.

Proposed Solution: More and Deeper Exchange Programs

If this explanation has merit, then a promising policy to generate more demand for democracy and civil liberties within the Russian public over the long term would be to dramatically increase the scope and enrich the content of academic exchanges and partnerships between the United States and Russia. Exposing large numbers of Russian students directly to life in the United States and to the culture and traditions of liberal education that still prevail in most U.S. institutions of higher learning may foster greater demand for democratic and participatory institutions among university educated Russians, as well as more positive views toward the United States. Effective exchanges work in both directions: U.S. students in Russian universities also establish lasting personal connections with Russian students and bring to the table their norms and expectations regarding political institutions and critical thinking about political issues. Apart from conventional academic exchanges, innovative programs that directly link Russian and U.S. universities also hold considerable promise. An encouraging example is the dual degree program in liberal arts from Bard College and Smolny College in St. Petersburg. More of what the program’s founder, Susan Gillespie, calls “deep partnerships” between U.S.-based and Russian institutions could significantly increase the exposure of Russian students to U.S. academic culture, and vice versa. In addition, new forms of cooperation between teams of Russian and U.S. students via international service learning projects and enhanced faculty exchanges should also be encouraged.

According to data compiled by the Institute of International Education, Russia ranks 25th in terms of the number of its students studying in American universities, with a paltry 4,692 students in 2010-11, down substantially from the peak of 7,025 in 1999-2000, while the overall number of foreign students in the United States has grown by about 50 percent since that time.⁴ Russia does not even rank in the top 25 destinations of study abroad for U.S. university students, of whom a mere 1,828 matriculated in Russia in 2009-10. Programs such as the celebrated Edmund S. Muskie graduate fellowships are too small in scale. The Bard/Smolny joint-degree program is notable not only for its success, but also for its unique nature. In sum, the current levels of academic exchanges and peer-to-peer programs linking Russian and U.S. universities are far too meager to have a noticeable impact on the political orientations of Russian university graduates. These numbers should be increased by several orders of magnitude in order to realize the potential of academic exchanges and partnerships to generate more demand for democracy among Russia's university graduates.

In order to promote greater demand for democracy among university graduates in Russia, the U.S. government should vastly increase its financial support for educational exchanges and provide U.S. universities with incentives to develop new partnerships with Russian institutions. Exchanges can be costly, and new partnerships require risky initial investments. U.S. universities face difficult financial circumstances and are loath to take on new ventures that do not help their bottom lines. Government incentives can motivate universities to substantially increase the scope and depth of exchanges. For its part, the Russian government has recently devoted substantial resources to improving the country's system of higher education, and it has sought increased collaboration with foreign scholars and institutions as part of these efforts. Although its approach has been largely technocratic, there is no reason why enhanced exchange programs and deeper institutional partnerships could not be incorporated into the reform agenda in ways that the Russian government would find advantageous.

Time for New Approaches to Democracy Assistance

Although university exchanges and partnerships are not often considered an important form of democracy assistance, it is time for a completely new approach to Russia. Whatever the merits of the civil society programs of the past two decades, Russian political reality is highly unfavorable for continuing the old approach. There is no guarantee that shifting democracy assistance funds toward academic exchanges and partnerships will increase demand for democracy among Russian university graduates. But the proposed measures will have many positive benefits for all parties even independent of their possible democratizing effects. They are politically palatable, and even desirable, to both governments. They represent an innovative approach to democracy assistance that will be far less costly to implement, both economically and politically, than the civil society programs that have had little to show after two decades.

⁴ *Open Doors: Report on International Educational Exchange*, Institute on International Educational Exchange, 2011 (www.iie.org/opendoors).

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