

The Next Step in Democracy Assistance to Russia: Targeting Military Reform

Sarah Mendelson

October 1997

PONARS Policy Memo 12

Carnegie Endowment for International Peace

If American policymakers want to help ensure a democratic future for Eastern Europe, then they should focus on ensuring a democratic future for Russia. If American policymakers see the condition of Eastern European militaries as an important aspect in ensuring this future, then they should view the condition of the Russian military as equally important. As US democracy assistance to Russia moves into its next phase, policymakers should increase efforts aimed at military reform, and they should incorporate lessons learned from the first phase of assistance. In line with these recommendations, a task force should consider: how the experience of democracy assistance in other sectors may be applied to military engagement to increase efficiency and avoid unintended consequences; how to adjust the organizational strategies of those involved in democracy assistance to account for specific local Russian conditions; and how to improve evaluative methods.

Why Continue Democracy Assistance to Russia?

The first phase of democracy assistance to Russia has come to an end. The US has supported the development of democratic institutions in Russia in a number of ways aimed at building institutions that are generally deemed necessary for a democratic state but which are unlikely to develop spontaneously, such as political parties, a legislative branch, rule of law, and a civilian-controlled military. As American policymakers push forward on NATO enlargement in order to secure Europe's future and aid democratization in Eastern Europe, they should stay equally focused on the next steps in helping democratization in Russia, and the lessons we have learned from the last several years.

Democracy assistance allows for a type of engagement in the post-Soviet, post-Cold War era that is particularly vital to both Russian and American interests. Politics and power in this region are no longer exclusively determined from Moscow. Non-ministerial and non-diplomatic relations matter more than ever. Our method of engagement has reflected this change. A few years ago, for example, many in Russia and in the US believed that the establishment of an electoral process should be a major priority. Despite all the nay-sayers and much doom and gloom, several national elections have been held, political parties are developing, the parliament generally functions, and a large cohort of Russian political consultants stand ready for hire. Western efforts helped Russia achieve this goal.

In addition to the development of political parties through competitive elections, initial American (and European) efforts at assistance focused on encouraging the development of political

institutions such as an independent media and judiciary, and public interest advocacy groups. While nothing about the process of democratization is ever easy or perfect, if one looks at these efforts in terms of the diffusion of ideas, they have affected how such institutions have developed. So now what? Should the US disengage from such activity? Should it continue to focus on similar types of engagement as in the past? Are there other types of institutions that ought to be promoted? The US should continue democracy assistance, but the focus should now shift to include an important institution that was left largely untouched by the first wave of assistance: the Russian military.

Democracy Assistance and the Russian Military

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, two dangerous dynamics have characterized the Russian military: politicization, with many men in uniform serving as parliamentary deputies, and de-professionalization, where suicide, hunger and insubordination are increasingly routine. These dynamics are in part due to the fact that the defense sector has been deeply and adversely affected by the government's policy of economic reform. Not surprisingly, this situation is seen by many in Russia as unacceptable. It led General Lev Rokhlin, chairman of the State Duma's Defense Committee, to form the movement "In Support of the Army, Defense Industry, and Military Science," a growing nation-wide political group that taps into military dissatisfaction and that of various opposition parties, including the Communist Party of the Russian Federation. There are some signs in fact that Rokhlin's unconstitutional calls to action--including for Yeltsin's removal from office--may be radicalizing the Communists in the Duma.

Currently, the military may be the largest institution in Russia that is the least reformed. Its members in the last several months have become increasingly politicized; Russian political pundits write now (more than ever) about the possibility of wide-spread revolt. In short, the condition of the military poses a threat to the democratization process in Russia. US efforts should be particularly directed at this sector. These efforts should be a cornerstone of both democracy assistance and what this administration has called "preventive defense." It is in American and Russian interests that the Russian military stop disintegrating and that Russia continue to develop along a democratic path; the type of regime Russia has at home affects how it behaves abroad. Who rules whom in Russia is an issue that affects us all. The contract that exists in democracies where the military serves the state needs to be more clearly established and strengthened in Russia. Without its fortification, the lack of reform in the military puts Russia's democratization in peril.

What can US efforts do to change the situation? They cannot rebuild or reform the military, but they can make a difference. The Cooperative Threat Reduction (CTR) program among others has included small amounts of money to promote democratization in the defense and military sectors and military-to-military exchanges have occurred. They have specifically focused on efforts to build support for political reforms among the defense and military sectors, exposing the different branches of the Russian military to the nature of civil-military relations in a democratic state, and institutionalizing high-level professional relationships with counterparts in democratic states. Of the \$1.8 billion allocated between 1992 and 1997 to CTR, only \$50 million has been spent on these types of efforts. This last figure is small when compared with other types of democracy

initiatives to Russia: at its peak, US AID allocated \$44 million in FY 1994. A first-line response would be to increase and enhance what many in the Pentagon have been doing for several years.

Additionally, there are many issues that both US and Russian militaries face which could be discussed in depth in a series of meetings with high-level officers and General Staff members. Topics might include defense budgeting, public relations, legislative relations, social problems within the armed forces, problems associated with the transition from a conscript to a professional military, and the role of non-commissioned officers. In order for such activities to occur, funding within the US defense budget must be significantly increased. CTR's main mission to de-nuclearize Ukraine, Kazakstan and Belarus and the safe demobilization and storage of 4700 nuclear warheads in the region has been largely successful. While CTR should and will continue to be involved with the Russian nuclear weapons establishment, funding should increasingly be directed toward supporting reform within the Russian armed forces. Multilateral opportunities for addressing Russian military reform also exist. Decisionmakers should make the Permanent Joint Council an active and important forum for military engagement; the PJC was in part established specifically to facilitate the expansion of "political-military consultations and cooperation" and to "enhance military-to-military dialogue between Russia and NATO members."

Engagement between the US and the Russian militaries should involve more than contact. Civilian and military decisionmakers at the highest levels in both the US and Russia must prioritize straight talk about the state of the Russian military. As Grigory Yavlinky recently told US policymakers, American influence in Russia has declined and will continue to decline unless American policymakers are willing to take a more "open and honest approach" about the difficulties involved in reform. This means drawing attention in 1997 to the perilous state of the military and the need for immediate reform in the same way that American decisionmakers talked in 1995-96 about the necessity for Russian elections.

Applying Lessons From Democracy Assistance to Russia

Lessons learned from the first phase of democracy assistance should be applied to the next phase aimed at democratization within the military. A high-level task force with representatives from the Pentagon, the State Department and AID as well as non-governmental experts ought to make recommendations that look specifically at ways in which regular consultations between those engaged in helping to build various different institutions could be established, how the strategies that organizations use might be altered to take into account a variety of local conditions rather than applying universal practices, and how evaluations of efforts might go beyond where they are currently.

1) Consult In Order To Minimize Unintended Consequences

To date, there has been little coordination between or among different US governmental agencies or among non-governmental groups that have supported democratization efforts despite many important similarities in goals and methods. Efforts at building political parties, developing free media, rule of law, local government, to name a few, provide lessons to those people engaged in defense sector contacts and vice versa. All efforts involve both developing relationships that

have had in many cases transformative effects and the introduction of ideas that do not fit with previous conceptions or behavior. Initial responses to these ideas are often skeptical, but some ideas have transferred and taken hold in the new Russia. A task force could sponsor consultations between sectors, such as those working on the development of political parties and those working with the military. These consultations should prove a valuable resource for avoiding a variety of programmatic problems and in particular, helping avoid negative unintended consequences, which can be impressive and wide-spread as technologies and ideas often take on a life of their own.

For example, the US National Democratic Institute and the International Republican Institute in Moscow trained a wide variety of Russian political activists on many aspects of campaigns and elections but never talked about the military and elections, and specifically, that there should be no interference of commanding officers with how soldiers vote. Some of these Russian activists worked with the military leading up to the elections. Two weeks before the first round of the presidential elections in June 1996, then Defense Minister Pavel Grachev announced that the Far Eastern Fleet had voted unanimously for Boris Yeltsin. NDI and IRI clearly could not independently have prevented this type of fraud from occurring, but American groups working on aspects of democratization that impact the military should, at a minimum, consult and coordinate with those organizations working on reform in the military.

2) Build Strategies That Take Account of Context

The indigenous organizations that Western groups work with are crucial in whether or not ideas and techniques transfer to Russia. "Alien" ideas can diffuse if Western organizations have an entrepreneurial domestic broker who considers it in his or her interest to help diffuse the ideas. Simply put, it is not enough to have a Russian counterpart like what you are trying to do. They must also be able to help "sell" it domestically. Similarly, programs are stymied if Western organizations fail to identify the local partners--people, networks and organizations--that are most supportive of Western efforts. Identifying partners takes time and knowledge of the region, but good relationships are perhaps the most important criterion for democracy assistance programs. A task force could help American organizations build into their strategies an awareness of this functional relationship and methods for dealing with it.

This functional relationship is, if anything, most important for US efforts at helping military reform where there are often impediments to identifying the best (i.e. enthusiastic and entrepreneurial) local partner. DOD should assign democratization experts with regional expertise to act as permanent representatives in Moscow to liaison with the General Staff, the Ministry of Defense, and the Ministry of Economics (which deals with all non-nuclear aspects of CTR) and other defense-related organizations. As in other democracy assistance work, these experts would spend most their time building relationships with people in the defense and military sectors which would inform all programming decisions.

3) Adjust Expectations Based On Better Evaluations

American organizations promoting democratization face a policy imperative to develop better criteria for evaluating their programs in order to justify continued Congressional funding. Evaluations need to better capture important aspects of the process--and not just the outcome of democratization. The real success of democratization programs--and the long-term enhancement

of US national security--derives not from so-called "good guys winning" but from the way in which democratic ideals take hold in institutions. A task force could identify evidence of attitudinal change as well as institutional and organizational adjustment to the post-Soviet era.

A starting point would be to identify ideas and techniques that have been introduced within specific sectors and study those that have largely or partially been adopted; and those that have never taken hold. The task force would identify trends across sectors and analyze factors that led to the different ways in which ideas have or have not taken hold, such as the strategies of Western organizations, the repetition of similar ideas by various Western organizations, and specific domestic political conditions. The task force would be addressing ways in which various ideas and techniques have helped make democracy sustainable--whether it was, for example, by helping to institutionalize multi-party elections, or a reformed military. Encouraging the development of evaluative criteria that better capture the nature of this process, could help adjust public (and politicians') expectations for political development in Russia.

© PONARS 1997