

# The Role for US Democracy Assistance: Helping Build Parties from the Bottom Up

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Despite the extraordinary development of the Russian political party system over the past ten years of political transition, parties themselves remain elite-dominated organizations with little connection to societal interests. This configuration of political parties supports an interpretation of Russia as an illiberal democracy--a state in which competitive elections provide citizens with choices among candidates but little access to the levers that control government policy. The election of President Vladimir Putin in the absence of viable alternative candidates and amidst claims of media bias and campaign fraud is a prime example of the current state of affairs.

Prevailing political conditions should not be seen as an indication of Russia being lost. Rather, Russia has entered a stage on the road to full democracy, comparable to other transitional states ten years after the introduction of competitive elections. If Russian democracy appears fragile, it is because any democracy that is not yet consolidated is fragile. However, if the US focuses attention on the development of institutions and not the political disposition of individual leaders, there has been and may still be tremendous progress toward a more responsive political system. Most notably, Russia's political party system does not guarantee governmental accountability, but may provide a framework for citizens to participate and exercise their political rights.

While not ignoring human rights abuses, the US should now rest its democracy policy on the ideas of James Madison expressed in the Federalist Papers. Madison's view of democracy stresses strong institutions that check personal ambition and an active electorate that is structured by a complex web of interacting civic groups. This view of democratic consolidation argues that the US continue democracy aid targeted at institution-building while fostering the development of connections between local-level civic groups and the party system structure.

## **Marginalized Voters**

For a total of ten years of competitive elections first in the Soviet Union and then in the Russian Federation, the process of party organization development was driven by political elites with very little input from citizens between elections or during the nomination and campaign stages of the electoral process. This description of Russian

parties will not surprise observers who recognize the lag in civic development in the post-Soviet years and the lack of connection between party organizations and their supporters.

Based on a series of surveys of party officials across Russia, I have argued that the elite-driven party system is increasingly organized around patronage. This logic of party organization links public officials together in a vertically integrated hierarchy that controls both public resources and the institutional machinery of elections. Further, the data shows that party organizations are national in scope and do not reflect regional interests. This surprising finding--a nascent national party system--can be plausibly explained by the gap between voters and party organizations and the failure of parties to organize around issues important to specific constituencies. Absent connection to voters, parties do register regional differences in the electorate. Still, the finding underscores the potential for the party system to act as a lever for voters to press their demands on the national government.

Institutional rules such as election laws and constitutional guarantees of strong executive power reinforce patronage linkages that bind elites and undermine the power of voters. This pattern can be seen in both national and regional elections. At the presidential level, the strong patronage levers available to Putin drove all other viable candidates from the race, essentially deciding the outcome before a single vote was cast. On the regional level, Dmitri Ayatskov's bid for reelection as governor of Saratov illustrates a similar pattern. In each case, the race was accompanied by considerable manipulation of media and government resources; and in the case of Saratov's gubernatorial race, there have been persistent rumors that a manipulated nomination process excluded all other serious candidates.

In Russia's electoral environment, which lacks both civic pressure and institutional incentives to form voter linkages, there is little hope that current politicians in Russia will remedy the growing gap between voters and their representatives at all levels. This impulse must originate from citizens who come together to influence the political process throughout the electoral cycle.

### **It's Up to the Voters**

Organized voter groups will provide strong incentives for party reform that will reverberate throughout the political system. Voter groups can produce alternative candidates or support the campaign activities of candidates within the current party system who share their views. Most importantly, these groups can play a critical role in working toward a more transparent electoral process.

Yet the growth of civic organizations has proved difficult in Russia. Along with the legacy of patronage, seventy years of Soviet rule left an additional legacy--a fragmented and politically alienated society. Unlike West European democracies, where political parties formed on the backs of tightly organized labor unions, Russia lacks nationally organized social groups with a shared political identity. These groups provide the

incentive for politicians to trade issue-representation for votes. Organized voter groups also provide incentives for elites to cooperate to fulfill campaign promises in order to stay in office. Without stable voter groups as the raw material of political bargains, elites have very little incentive to do either.

Creating shared political identity is a time-consuming and cost-intensive enterprise. It will not occur spontaneously and it is not likely to occur for Russia on a national scale for some time. Given this, it is critical to create the building blocks of voter-party integration by working at the lowest levels of electoral politics. Focusing attention on mass organizing at this level would ensure that local efforts would have rapid payoffs in terms of seats in city, regional, or oblast-level councils. In turn, such organizations provide incentives for national parties to become more actively engaged in regional politics.

Finally, if properly trained, such civic groups could serve as election observers and monitors to counteract the electoral fraud that is the hallmark of patronage politics. At this level, activist groups could also use low-cost campaign techniques such as door-to-door campaigning, telephone banks, and public education and mobilization to counteract the preponderance of political resources within the machine.

The model for such activities is the US civil rights movement. This is an excellent example of a mass movement of disenfranchised voters that tapped into the party structure and forced political change and the restoration of political and civil rights to all citizens. Most importantly, the final result of the movement was a truly competitive two-party system in the US South.

### **The Role for US Democracy Assistance**

What can the US do to further Russian democratization along the lines suggested above? First, the government should renew its commitment to democracy assistance programs that have aided the development of political institutions. There are a number of successful programs that can be built upon to continue to build party institutions that can incorporate voter demands.

These programs should be expanded to:

- educate current policymakers about the long-term effects of institutional change. Currently, a number of major changes to Russia's political structure have been proposed. These changes have long-term implications for the nature of Russian democracy. It is critical to aid efforts on the part of Russian and Western non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to educate both citizens and policymakers about the political effects that are likely to be wrought by institutional changes. For example, a return to the appointment of regional governors would be a significant step backwards. Also proposed is a revision of electoral law that would change Duma elections from a mixed proportional representation (PR)/single-mandate district (SMD) system to PR or SMD only;

- enable constitutional checks and balances to work more effectively. Russia's constitution is not devoid of institutional checks and balances. Every effort should be made to strengthen these structures to allow them to work more effectively. This includes maintaining programs that work to strengthen the Duma vis-à-vis the president and to expand legislative oversight over the bureaucracy, strengthening current party-building programs within the legislature; and
- continue to assist policymakers in building new institutions that allow citizens to access government.

In addition, it is critical to step up democracy assistance to build an infrastructure of civic organizations and new linkages between citizens' organizations and political parties. This can be done over time through a series of steps that:

- foster the emergence of civic organizations at the lowest political levels. Civic groups organized around common interests such as environmental issues, women's issues, education, neighborhood safety, and youth groups play a critical role in democratic politics. In addition to fostering the evolution of active and informed citizens, these organizations become important resources for alternative local politicians and tools for creating more effective constituencies in the future;
- foster linkages between civic organizations in different regions. Once established, these groups can be linked together to form regional or national constituencies to strengthen their leverage vis-à-vis party institutions. Such linkages are the initial steps in identifying national constituencies and influencing national politics;
- nurture civic activism in the electoral arena. Civic associations can play a number of roles in the electoral arena. Associations can mobilize membership to support particular parties or candidates during the campaign; they can provide much needed resources to reform candidates battling the disproportionate resources of the patronage parties. In partnership with NGOs, international monitors, the Central Election Commission (CEC), and other organizations, locally-based civic organizations can also participate in monitoring election procedures throughout the campaign period to battle electoral corruption by local officials; and finally
- encourage the involvement of party organizations in local elections.

NGOs have been extraordinarily active in the area of party-building and have met with some success. As a next step toward building party organizations, NGOs should move to foster partisan activity on the local and regional level. This would have the dual benefit of building regional party organizations and also creating an opportunity to build links between these party organizations and local civic groups. At the same time, this strategy would refocus attention away from individual politicians and toward creating organizational infrastructure.

*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)*

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