

2 **RUSSIA AND DEMOCRACY**

By Jeremy Kinsman, 2013

INTRODUCTION: UNDERSTANDING THE RUSSIAN EXPERIENCE

The Russian struggle to transform from a totalitarian system to a homegrown democracy has been fraught with challenges. Today, steps backward succeed and compete with those going forward. Democratic voices mingle with the boorish claims of presidential spokesmen that the democratic phase in Russia is done with, in favour of a patriotic authoritarian hybrid regime under the strong thumb of a charismatic egotist. Meanwhile, excluded by Russian government fiat from further direct engagement in support of democratic development, Western democracies back away, though they are unwilling to abandon solidarity with Russia's democrats and members of civil society seeking to widen democratic space in their country.

Russia's halting democratic transition has now spanned more than a quarter of a century. The Russian experience can teach much about the difficulties of transition to democratic governance, illuminating the perils of overconfidence surrounding the way developed democracies operated with regard to other countries' experiences 20 years ago. This Russian case study is more about the policies of democratic governments than about the field practice of diplomats. It is a study whose amendment in coming years and decades will be constant.

RUSSIAN EXCEPTIONALISM

As the *Handbook* insists, each national trajectory is unique. Russia's towering exceptionalism is not, as US scholar Daniel Treisman (2012) reminds us, because the country has a particularly "dark side," nor because the famous Russian "soul" makes the country an "enigma" to outsiders. The Russian experience is highly complex, but objectively understandable.

The Russian journey is unique in dimension, but also in significance: the bumpy transformation of the Soviet Union and then Russia from a totalitarian state, a

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command economy and a harsh empire to what followed — a partly democratic extractive market economy whose world view is one of non-aligned post-imperial nationalism — certainly matches any other democratic transition experience in scale, political distance to be travelled and global significance.

Russia's October 1917 revolution had itself been a massive global game-changer, dubbed, in 1919, the "Ten Days that Shook the World" by American journalist John Reed. Seven decades later, the envisioned counter-passage has moved, in just a few years, from one extreme to another, and would have represented a reversal without human precedent. The vision, from the rigid and cruel Communist Party dictatorship, which over several generations consolidated the Bolshevik capture of the revolution, to an imagined virtual opposite: a pluralistic political and economic system whose rough, if elusive, lines were on the minds of hundreds of thousands of marchers in Moscow in 1989, and millions who discovered free debate in those first glasnost years. It should be no surprise that Russia's transformation faltered. Transformative political journeys in institutional development and behaviour modification that were less extreme in the United Kingdom, the United States and France each took a century and a half at least.

At the time of Russian transformation, German Chancellor Helmut Kohl termed it a defining handicap that "70 years of dictatorship have left the Russians in total ignorance of the world around them. Two generations couldn't get out into the world." Any notion that a short-cut remedy for Russia was simply to copy the ways of the democratic and market societies of "the world," however, woefully underestimated the extent of change Russia would face.

In 1998, Václav Havel predicted that it would take Russia 50 or 100 years to develop a democratic vocation. Indeed, as we know, in the first years of the twenty-first century, Russia's new leadership subtracted an increasing amount of the democratic space carved out by Mikhail Gorbachev and then Boris Yeltsin. In 2013, the compression of basic individual rights continues. Havel's literary associate Paul Wilson (2012) recently pointed out the importance of understanding such backward steps as a key part of the "teachable experience" for outside democracies when he proposed that "In today's world, knowledge of how democracies can be lost may be as valuable an instrument of democracy as an understanding of how they are won."

Western democracies were motivated to support Russia's efforts because there was a generalized acknowledgement that in ending the Cold War, Mikhail Gorbachev had changed our world almost as profoundly as their own. The case study sets out the ways that, despite best intentions (most of the time), Western democracies failed to address the complexities inherent in Russian transformation challenges after 1989. Even if they had got Russian politics right and understood how Russia could pull off a transformation whose complexity and extremity were unprecedented, and had the support at home to help more amply in concrete terms, the challenge of Russian reformers would still have been incredibly difficult.

Regardless of the strong solidarity felt by democrats everywhere with the Russian people, it is emphatically a Russian struggle, not that of Western democracies. Today,

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Russian democrats insist theirs is not a lost cause. Though the word “democracy” itself had become tainted for many in Russia because of their ragged experience over the first transitional 20 years, the evidence collected by polling and research organizations such as Levada and the Center for Strategic Research shows that an increasing number of Russian citizens again hold the objective of a more democratic Russia as a devoutly cherished purpose.

This case study is in two parts, which are closely linked. The first part begins with a historical overview, then weighs Russia’s experiences in the 1990s and assesses the effectiveness of Western democracies’ efforts to support Russian democratic transitions in that crucial period. The second, shorter part of the case study documents the individual actions of diplomats and international civil society in response to events in Russia since 2000.

PART I: RUSSIAN DEMOCRATIC TRANSITIONS BEFORE 2000

A historical perspective on democratic transformation is essential. As Sheri Berman (2013) recently wrote:

Every surge of democratization over the last century — after World War I, after World War II, during the so-called third wave in recent decades — has been followed by an undertow, accompanied by widespread questioning of the viability and even desirability of democratic governance in the areas in question. As soon as political progress stalls, a conservative reaction sets in as critics lament the turbulence of the new era....One would have hoped that by now people would....understand that this is what political development actually looks like, what it has always looked like....and that the only way ahead is to plunge forward rather than turn back.

Beginnings: Glasnost and Perestroika

When Mikhail Gorbachev launched a campaign for greater openness and decontrol in Soviet society after he became Soviet leader in 1985, it was already known that centrifugal forces were pulling the state apart at the seams. Many Soviet industrial, educational and scientific achievements in the first 60 years had been monumental, though obtained through massive human cost at the time. By the 1970s, however, the USSR had been trumped in the space race and pushed beyond its capacity in the arms race. While official statistics continued to show modest growth in wages, the Soviet economy was, in competitive terms, stagnating at almost every level, and always to the detriment of citizens/consumers who were the least understood

and satisfied component of the top-down command and control central planning equation.

Moreover, as Leon Aron (2012) reminds us, Gorbachev had become persuaded by adviser Alexander Yakovlev that perestroika “was first and foremost a moral and spiritual transformation,” an “attempt to...end the amorality of the regime.” The two men were convinced that the moral legacy of the Soviet police state imposed an insupportable burden on society and needed to be confronted and exposed, though doing so discomfited many in the *nomenklatura*. Gorbachev took pains to valorize the party’s socialist vocation in his speech to the party’s celebration of the seventieth anniversary of the October Revolution in November 1987. But in an unaccustomed spirit of making open secrets public truths, he also spoke of its history of “real crimes based on the abuse of power” and “mass repressions” that were “immense and unforgiveable.”

BUT HOW TO REFORM? A QUESTION UNANSWERED

If circumstances argued there was no real alternative to political and economic liberalization, how to do it and how far to go were both untested questions. Intense debate and differing views still colour recollection and analysis of that turbulent period, especially whether Gorbachev’s decentralizing reforms — without first building the backstop of a market-based supply function to fill the gaps — didn’t have the inevitable effect of turning economic stagnation into a chaotic downward spiral for many Russians. Reformist critics credit Gorbachev with launching a historic process, but judge him harshly for temerity when faced with key decisions.

Of course, Gorbachev was engaged in a massive and complex balancing act, weighing heavy, internal political and economic challenges while simultaneously struggling with gravely aggravating adverse external economic conditions. Forced by its own production inefficiencies to import massive amounts of grain, the Soviet state found itself unable to finance these essential food imports, as the world price of oil — the main earner of hard currency — plunged by 50 percent between 1980 and 1989.

Meanwhile, state supply functions in the centrally planned economic system broke down. Producers used newly awarded autonomy to drop inefficient suppliers and insolvent customers. Stark inequalities widened as wages in the relatively few enterprises that were succeeding climbed without top-down controls, while unemployment elsewhere soared, particularly in production locations chosen over the years of centrally planned nation building for political rather than economic rationales. During the 1980s, shortages spread beyond food supplies to the whole range of consumer goods, deepening the state’s need to borrow more money to finance hard-currency purchases from abroad. Foreign debt climbed from US\$29 billion in 1985 to US\$97 billion by 1991.

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Ecological degradation was widespread. Traumatic disaster struck — at Chernobyl on April 12, 1986, and then in Armenia in 1988, when an earthquake crumpled buildings constructed illegally with substandard materials. Post-disaster dissembling by the authorities added to the public shame, further agitating restiveness over systemic incompetence and corruption.

The “Undertow” that Succeeded the Euphoric First Wave of Reform

Glasnost released widespread and swift public antipathy to the Soviet political and economic order. It seemed increasingly apparent the majority of citizens had lost faith in the system and the religious and cultural repressions that the Communist party had, as a matter of course, imposed for so long.

By 1988, citizens’ expectations underwent a seismic transformation. Free debate exploded as society began getting used to telling the truth about itself. The circulation of the journal *Argumentifakty* (“arguments and facts”), which had been a dreary Communist Party propaganda sheet, soared into tens of millions when it became a purveyor of hitherto secret information and essays calling for liberating reforms of the state and society. *Komsomol’skaya Pravda*, *Literaturnaya gazeta*, and the satiric weekly *Ogonyok* also reached tens of millions avid readers, creating “the first national forum of open political and social debate open to Soviet citizens” who eagerly debated opinions which a decade earlier would have earned lengthy prison terms (Aron, 2012).

The intoxicating experience of freedom of thought and expression captivated society. Soon, however, it had to examine evidence of a deteriorating economic reality. As the state’s fiscal disarray deepened, budget deficits reached 30 percent of GDP with immediate inflationary effect. The state expropriated savings. Living standards fell sharply.

Once the genie was out of the bottle and all controls were open to question, the long-repressed people, while ready to embrace deep changes, were faced with unexpected consequences for which they were unprepared. There was no template for their experience. As the system came apart and inflation eroded the value of pensions and savings, backlash set in. Having lost faith in the communist system and having seen their heightened expectations of change deflated, citizens began to lose confidence in the tentative and uncoordinated replacement reforms undertaken by leaders who could not communicate end goals with clarity or conviction.

Though he ended the Cold War and envisaged a Europe which, in President George H. W. Bush’s phrase, was to be “whole and free,” Gorbachev still lacked a clear plan for the democratic transformation of the Soviet Union itself, or of a role for the Communist Party in a political landscape where it no longer held a monopoly of power.

Gorbachev’s indecision was in large part existential: as Alexander Yakovlev much later regretted, Gorbachev was intrinsically wired to judge that turning away from the “socialist choice” would be “inconceivable.” Always playing catch-up to public

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opinion and trying to react to economic pressures, and unaware himself of where the process was heading or how to shape it, Gorbachev, according to Yakovlev, “could never take the next step toward democratization” during his six-and-a-half years in power (cited in Remnick, 1994).

Yakovlev had privately broached with Gorbachev the idea of splitting the Communist Party into reform and conservative wings and allowing their electoral competition, but Gorbachev still seemed to believe the “humanization” of communism could extend the life of the Party’s singular and privileged status. By 1989, Gorbachev’s faith that the Communist Party might become humanized and inclusive had waned. He ended the Party’s monopoly on political power and permitted the formation of rival political parties to compete in direct legislative elections scheduled for later that year. Though electoral rules reserved two-thirds of the seats in the Congress of Peoples’ Deputies for Party loyalists, a minority of newly elected reformers, including Andrei Sakharov, whose banishment to internal exile in Gorky had recently been ended by Gorbachev personally, were able to challenge authority at every turn during sessions televised for the first time. The commotion of 85 hours of free debate galvanized a massive public audience that reacted sharply to Gorbachev’s authoritarian hostility to Sakharov (whose microphone he turned off). When Sakharov suddenly died on December 14, 1989, a cortège of 50,000 followed his coffin through the streets.

As evident from the history of democratic evolution elsewhere, inclusive political and economic conditions in society emerge most enduringly when they are the product of extensive political and social conflict and bargaining over time between the elites who held power and those seeking its wider dispersal. In Russia, a combination of external and internal factors was accelerating a process that pre-empted such bargaining. Polarization widened between rejectionists of the old system and those in authority who lagged behind the curve and felt threatened.

Meanwhile, the foundering economy was aggravated by unprecedented strikes by Siberian miners. Growing numbers of older citizens and life-long Party members who felt undermined and destabilized by the monumental changes taking place turned out in the streets in counter-protests against reform. Doctrinaire hardliners began to conspire against the Politburo’s domination by a handful of reformist members (basically, Yakovlev, Shevardnadze, and until his dismissal in 1987, Yeltsin) who were then pressing Gorbachev to step up the tempo and scale of change, especially Boris Yeltsin, who challenged Gorbachev to more radical reform — though he was also vague on specifics.

Public questioning of the regime’s legitimacy as well as its competence deepened. Support for Gorbachev and his non-specific outline of a softer form of communism collapsed after 1990. In January 1991, 52 percent of the population had approved of Gorbachev’s actions, but by February, only 15 percent did. By this time, Yeltsin’s popularity was overcoming that of Gorbachev by a considerable margin. Gorbachev tried to manoeuvre through the shoals of declining public support and growing opposition in Party ranks, tacking backward and forward. In a brutal concession

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to KGB hardliners, he authorized the use of force against pro-independence demonstrators in Vilnius, Lithuania in January 1990, which killed 13.

Anatoly Sobchak, the ostensibly liberal political leader in Leningrad, observed in 1991 that the forces of “dictatorship and democracy were living side by side.” Gorbachev’s hardline adversaries in the Politburo were becoming emboldened to attempt to reverse the trends and return the country to dictatorship.

On August 19, 1991, at 4:00 a.m., a throwback dictatorship cabal absorbing the leadership of the power ministries (including the vice president of the USSR, the prime minister, the ministers of defence and the interior, and the head of the KGB) tried to seize control of the USSR while Gorbachev vacationed in Crimea. But their amateurish attempted coup collapsed within days in the face of public non-support for these wooden figures who hearkened to a darker past. A protective crowd of 100,000 surrounded the headquarters of Russian Republic President Boris Yeltsin, who called on the people to reject the coup. Several things contributed to the coup’s collapse:

- The coup leaders, as incompetent as they were unappealing, were no match for the buoyant Boris Yeltsin, who enjoyed the status of being the first (and until then, only) elected leader in the Soviet Union.
- USSR security forces refused the orders of putsch leaders to fire on protesting Soviet citizens.
- Western democracies regarded the seizure of power as unacceptable, even though in some foreign ministries the pragmatic argument was initially that this was Soviet “business as usual” and that democratic governments should “wait and see.”

For democratic embassies in Moscow, the coup experience was a wake-up call about the fragility of the democratic experiment. They doubled down on programs to support democrats in civil society, institutional transformation and national programs of humanitarian relief. But they hardly anticipated the extent to which the coup’s aftermath would undermine Gorbachev and ultimately the Soviet Union itself.

Yeltsin Ascendant

Boris Yeltsin, a renegade communist establishment figure, was the great beneficiary of September’s dramatic events. For several years, he had been anything but deferential to Gorbachev’s authority. After Yeltsin criticized Gorbachev’s policies and even his personal example at a Communist Party plenum in 1987, Gorbachev sought to crush and humiliate Yeltsin. Expelled from the central command of the USSR, Yeltsin succeeded, in May 1990, in wresting election as Chairman of the Supreme Soviet of the Russian Republic. He then proceeded to win a historic popular election in June 1991 to the newly created post of President of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.

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Gorbachev, who had declined the option of an open election for his own post of President of the USSR, failed to grasp that, as the first genuinely elected leader in the Soviet Union, Boris Yeltsin had benefitted from the more open environment and had become, for Russians, the symbol of their hopes for democracy.

By November, Yeltsin had begun to create distinct parallel institutions in Russia and pressed his ambitions outward. Taking advantage of a CSCE ministerial conference in Moscow, he and his newly minted “Foreign Minister” Andrei Kozyrev (who had been a rising star in the USSR Foreign Ministry), summoned its delegates and ministers to an essentially competitive showcase encounter. Most delegates viewed the command performance as a theatrical exercise in *amour-propre*. Few grasped the extent to which political force had leaked away from the once-galvanizing international figure of Gorbachev toward Yeltsin who, in a matter of weeks, would eclipse the President of the USSR and end the USSR itself.



Boris Yeltsin, president of the Russian Federation, makes a speech from atop a tank in front of the Russian Parliament building in Moscow on August 19, 1991. Yeltsin called on the Russian people to resist the Communist hardliners in the Soviet coup. (AP Photo)

The USSR Breakup

Was the ensuing breakup of the USSR inevitable? As early as 1978, French historian H el ene Carr ere d’Encausse had predicted the intensification of the USSR’s “nationalities problem.” She pointed out that Soviet citizens in republics as different as Christian European Estonia and Muslim Asian Turkmenistan had virtually nothing in common beyond the shared afflictions of chronic economic inefficiency

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and the straitjacket of a top-down and partly alien and atheistic police state. Polls a decade later showed that even ethnic Russians in the constituent republics in Central Asia, the Baltics and Ukraine favoured independence from Moscow, which became increasingly the outcome pursued by state legislatures and local leaders.

The economic crisis driving public opinion in 1990-1991 had undermined the regime's authority and opened the door further for the constituent republics to seize more of the economic reins and shed Moscow's leadership. The 1991 coup attempt only accelerated their eagerness to institutionalize change. The leaders of the constituent republics — often opportunistic ex-USSR *apparatchiks* — recognized that without formal changes, newly loosened federation controls could always be tightened again if conservatives succeeded in retaking power in Moscow.

Gorbachev began to attempt different formulas for a looser USSR "Union Treaty" to accommodate the mood, but without success. On December 1, 1991, Ukrainians voted by majority of 92.3 percent to secede from the USSR, electing Leonid Kravchuk as president of independent Ukraine the same day. Yeltsin was only too willing to join Western countries in forcing the issue by recognizing Ukraine as an independent state the next day.

In concert with the leaders of Belarus and Ukraine, on Sunday, December 8, 1991 at the Belvezha Forest hunting lodge in Belarus, Yeltsin declared the simultaneous independence of the three republics, which would in effect write the Soviet Union out of existence.

Two weeks later, in Brussels, at a ministerial meeting of the NATO-Warsaw North Atlantic Cooperation Council (an innovation launched to support East-West reconciliation and transition), Soviet Ambassador Nikolai Afanassievsky was called away to speak to Moscow by phone. He returned to inform the meeting that he had been instructed to remove the USSR nameplate from the conference table. On December 25, 1991, Gorbachev resigned. The flag of the USSR was lowered from the Kremlin tower over Red Square and a pre-revolutionary flag was raised in the historic name of Russia.

The End of the Cold War

Soviet and then Russian transformation unilaterally altered the entire global military equation. For East-West relations, the effect on the international political and strategic landscape was profound, even existential.

There is no specific moment when the Cold War ended. Hardliners on either side gave it up grudgingly, and vestiges of Cold War habits resurface even today. Together, President Reagan and Secretary Gorbachev (who assumed the title of President of the USSR only in 1990) relaxed the overarching nuclear rivalry, especially at their summit meeting in Reykjavik in October 1986, when they agreed to ban potentially destabilizing intermediate range nuclear missiles via the Intermediate-range Nuclear Forces Treaty.

Once socialist regimes collapsed across Central and Eastern Europe in late 1989, the rationale for perpetuating the institutional confrontation between NATO and the

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Warsaw Pact was invalidated. Even so, profound uncertainties remained, notably what Soviet Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze then cast as “the mother of all questions,” that is, the future military status of a united Germany.

Diplomatic activity over the next two years was intense. At the suddenly redundant confidence-building conference on “Open Skies” between Warsaw Pact and NATO alliances in Ottawa in January and February 1990 (the first East-West gathering since the fall of the Berlin Wall two months before), the formula of “two plus four” was launched by the US, the USSR, France and Germany to find agreement on the German unification process, at least within the exclusive circle of these key countries. UK Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher and French President François Mitterrand initially had mixed feelings about German unification, but Washington seemed committed to drive a process as rapid and conclusive as possible and Germany was prepared to offer the USSR massive compensation. The parties came quite swiftly to agreement and a treaty on Final Settlement on Germany was signed in Moscow on September 12, 1990.

As negotiations over the German endgame issues proceeded, the rival alliances began to put the Cold War behind them. In June 1990, the semi-annual NATO Foreign Ministers’ meeting at the Turnberry Golf Club in Scotland extended to the Warsaw Pact “the hand of friendship and cooperation.”

Meanwhile, presidents Bush and Gorbachev conducted their own historic parallel diplomacy at summits in Malta, Washington and Helsinki, the last of which secured a non-objection from the USSR to a UN Security Council resolution to expel Iraq from just-invaded Kuwait. Soviet acquiescence briefly transformed the Council into the cooperative body the UN’s postwar founders had intended.

By November 1990, at a Paris summit meeting, the CSCE cemented the notion of a common security framework stretching from “Vancouver to Vladivostok.” In July 1991, Russian President Gorbachev was invited as a special guest to the G7 summit in London. As he appeared on the balcony of Lancaster House, hundreds of G7 aides on a lunch break in the garden below broke into spontaneous applause.

An Enemy Transformed? The USSR’s Peaceful Withdrawal

It is exceptionally rare for a military-supported empire to evacuate its lands voluntarily without suffering military defeat. In 1985, the Soviet military still ranked as the world’s largest, numbering almost six million in uniform. But by 1990, it had been reduced to 3.4 million, which the dissolution of the USSR further reduced. By 1996, troops under Moscow’s command were down to 1.3 million.

Though lives and assumptions were certainly disrupted, the Soviet empire’s dissolution was as peaceful as any in history, if one considers the scale of change involved. The costs of withdrawing personnel from Eastern and Central Europe were massive. Moscow brought home about 1.7 million personnel (800,000 troops, 400,000 civilians and 500,000 family members). Germany contributed significantly

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to resettlement. The US announced the intention to do so as well, but found itself frustrated by a lack of congressional support at home.

Central and Eastern European Warsaw Pact members abruptly found themselves independent actors. Ex-USSR frontline republics Ukraine and Belarus proceeded to de-nuclearize the USSR strategic military assets left behind. Obviously, Western democracies welcomed the drastic revision of USSR military doctrine, which suspended military planning for a major confrontation versus NATO or China, leading to a suspension of mutual targeting.

In consequence, barriers to cooperation crumpled. In an example unthinkable a few years before, in 1993, Canadian military transport aircraft were landing at what had been secret air bases around Moscow, making humanitarian deliveries of obstetric and other maternal health supplies from the Canadian Red Cross to adjacent rural communities devastated by change. Local councils that had never seen a foreigner greeted each delivery with civic receptions. At Vladivostok on the Pacific, a Canadian Navy frigate became the first NATO vessel to call on the till-then closed strategic port. The sailors' first duty was to tend to the graves of a few dozen Canadian policemen who had died there from the flu epidemic in 1919.

Russia's withdrawal from empire and reversal of history had unique challenges. Unlike European colonial empires that wound down gradually or by force of military defeat in far-away foreign lands, Russia's stunning changes occurred on Russia's borders, and in lands where citizens were literally at home in what had been their own country.

Moreover, as Dmitry Trenin (2011), director of the Moscow Carnegie Centre has pointed out, the effects and costs were not buffered for Russia in the ways that softened comparable loss of overseas territories for Western Europeans following World War II. The European recovery was supported by the Marshall Plan, contributing to the *Wirtschaftswunder*, the postwar German economic miracle. Recovery also found a new defining framework in the emergence of the historic European cooperation project, which would lead to the European Union. Russia, too, embarked on changes, which were inherently voluntary and faced huge costs which, except for German military resettlement funds, had to be borne mostly by Russia.

The Western Democratic Response to the Breakup of the USSR and to Russia's Internal Drama

By November 9, 1989, when the Berlin Wall fell, Gorbachev had already made clear to communist leaders in Prague and Berlin that they were essentially on their own. The next day, the communist regime in Prague resigned en masse. Electoral democracy seemed imminent throughout the former Warsaw Pact area. The Soviet Empire itself was already shaking at its roots.

Western leaders grasped the significance of what was happening, but moved hesitantly to adapt to change. Initially, NATO Secretary-General Manfred Wörner told a group of Western ambassadors that it might be important to maintain the

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Warsaw Pact to ensure an orderly transition in the East. There were widespread fears that the end of the Cold War and the lifting of barriers between East and West would lead to a flood of refugees, especially from the Soviet Union; however, by the end of 1989, having been largely supportive of liberalizing or dissident movements in Poland, Hungary and Czechoslovakia, and Mikhail Gorbachev's reforms, Western leaders began to realize they had a responsibility to help the democratization process.

NATO Secretary-General Wörner travelled to Western capitals to drum up support for the creation of aid programs aimed at facilitating political and economic transitions. Party foundations and NGOs in the West initiated programs to help fledgling and inexperienced liberal political forces who were reaching for outside democratic support for a multi-party electoral system for which they had virtually no preparation. Each country and case would be specific, but Russia's unique power and role and the scale of transformation envisaged made the Russian experience uniquely significant.

Western democracies did not intend to undercut Soviet authorities. Their wish was to contribute indirectly to a more level playing field on their understanding that local authorities had chosen pluralistic political competition. The purpose of Western encouragement was not to pick winners, but to support political competition in newly opening political landscapes seemingly tilted in favour of well-established communist parties (whose popular strength the West overestimated). But in the USSR, the pluralistic choice had opposition. Apparent conversion at the top did not convince conservative elements in the *nomenklatura* which feared open political competition as a profound threat both to their own power and positions and to the overall influence of the Soviet state.

Once the USSR broke up, Western leaders knew it was politically essential to characterize the territorial retreat as something other than a national reversal. President George H. W. Bush and US Secretary of State James Baker bent over backwards to avoid triumphalism — though as candidate for re-election in 1992, Bush did once brag on the campaign trail that he had “won the Cold War,” that stylistic and political breach was unusual. Later, the claim that Ronald Reagan had “won” the Cold War, primarily by forcing the USSR into defence spending it could not afford, gained some partisan traction in the US, but it ignored evidence that Gorbachev was actually responding to a myriad of adverse internal and external circumstances.

In any event, despite statesmanlike efforts to avoid the notion of “winners” and “losers,” it soon became evident that many Russians felt like losers. They became truculent in the belief the West had taken advantage of them. This was the psychological and experiential challenge that Bill Clinton was assessing when, in 1993, he judged that what was happening in Russia was “the biggest and toughest thing out there. It's not just the end of communism, the end of the Cold War. That's what's over and done with. There's also stuff starting — stuff that's new. Figuring

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out what it is, how we work with it, how we keep it moving in the right direction: that's what we've got to do" (cited in Talbott, 2003).

But it was overreaching to believe "we" could so nimbly adapt to the challenge involved, as President Clinton later acknowledged when he came inevitably to recognize "the shortcoming of our policy and of Russian reform itself. We, like the reformers, had a far clearer notion of where we wanted to see Russia go than how it could get there, how long it would take, and what we could do to help" (ibid.). The lessons learned are very much worth retaining.

THE NATO "EXPANSION" ISSUE

Yeltsin reached out to the West early in his tenure as president of Russia, writing to NATO in December 1991 about "the question of Russia's membership." He received no reply. When Yeltsin described the two powers as being on the way to becoming "allies," President George H. W. Bush balked at accepting the term, under the pressure of advice and Republican habit.

The issue of NATO expansion eastward became especially vexed. The Soviet side, most prominently Mikhail Gorbachev himself, claimed that early discussions in "two plus four" and bilaterally with US Secretary of State Baker and other Western statesmen assumed NATO would not expand to absorb former Warsaw Pact members. That had been an initial assumption on the part of several, notably British Prime Minister John Major and Václav Havel. But there was nothing in writing on the point.

The truth probably resides in the confusion of real intentions being lost in translation. Baker acknowledges he did tell Gorbachev that "NATO will not expand one inch to the East" if the USSR acquiesced to a reunified Germany being in NATO, but that he had been referring to foreign NATO forces replacing Soviet troops in East Germany. In his recollection, NATO expansion to other countries eastward simply never came up at that time.

Havel, in any case, soon changed his mind in office as President of Czechoslovakia, joining Hungarian and Polish leaders in claiming their proper place in European institutions, which the Iron Curtain had excluded them from for so long. As Timothy Garton Ash (2012) wrote, "For the half of Europe stuck behind the Iron Curtain — what the Czech writer Milan Kundera called 'the kidnapped West' — the will to "return to Europe went hand in hand with the struggle for national and individual freedom."

NATO members took these leaders' point that Russia should not be awarded a veto on this defining aspiration of countries that had been held "captive" for two generations. Later, of course, the rationale was extended to other Warsaw Pact ex-members Bulgaria and Romania, and even to the ex-USSR Baltic republics, which had been forcibly drawn into the USSR by the Hitler-Stalin alliance in 1939. However, the possible induction of Ukraine and Georgia into NATO became a political "bridge too far" for many NATO members, especially after the risky

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Georgia-Russia conflict in 2008, when an eastward line for NATO was implicitly clarified for the foreseeable future.

The Russians were progressively unsettled by the ambivalence of the expansion process. By 1989, many Russians had presumed that, having themselves thrown off Communist dictatorship, they were pursuing common causes with fellow victims. Their neighbours' inability to accept the notion of a common political cause implied to Russians that enduring hostility was directed at Russians per se. This impression was reinforced by repeated warnings over hidden Russian intentions by some more or less Russophobic political personalities in Eastern Europe. Russians' ability to understand the depth of East European sentiments was no doubt clouded by the effects of decades of propaganda at home, which had blocked them from grasping the extent of the resentment felt by the people of Eastern and Central Europe over their capture through local Communist parties, manipulation and brute Soviet force, as in Hungary in 1956 and Prague in 1968.

The overall experience persuaded Russians that their efforts to embrace the West were being denigrated. This could — and should — have been handled much better by all concerned, but time sped by. In the normal press of events, Western political leaders had their own urgencies and priorities to deal with, while the whole complex Russian file seemed to insist on heavy maintenance.

Nonetheless, an ongoing program of building cooperation with Russia was always high on policy agendas. It is worth noting that during his two terms, US President Clinton met Russian President Yeltsin at 18 summit meetings in efforts to establish effective ways to support Russia's democratic transition, as well as international cooperation. Additionally, the Gore-Chernomyrdin Commission met 10 times to try to steer intensified bilateral cooperation in space, energy and technology.

The West was sufficiently well disposed, but the relaxation of tensions induced complacency, which was reinforced when policy goals became heavily invested in personal relations with Boris Yeltsin, who bonded with key leaders and whose instinctive affection for freedoms reassured them.

Governments were inadequately aware of the unprecedented depth of change convulsing Russian society. Foreign Minister Andrei Kozyrev tried to communicate an unusual wake-up call at the CSCE ministerial conference in Stockholm in December 1992, when he delivered a shockingly “mock” hardline speech which, he explained to the media an hour later, was an attempt to convey what Russia's policies would be like if the anti-democratic hardliners got power in Moscow. But Kozyrev's theatrical device was largely lost on Western officials unaccustomed to theatrical irony in the rituals of multilateral diplomacy at this high level.

A harsher wake-up call for Russia's partners rang during the attempted coup against Yeltsin from the parliamentary “White House” during the political and constitutional crisis in October 1993. Foreign Minister Kozyrev prophetically urged the G7 ambassadors summoned to an urgent meeting in the Foreign Ministry to: “Tell your leaders to support Yeltsin in this because we are as pro-Western a government as you are ever likely to see in Moscow.”

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G7 leaders did, in consequence, make more of an effort to generate demonstrable political rewards, extending Russia partial G8 membership by 1995, and proposing other formulas for integrating it more effectively into multilateral institutions, such as accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO). But unfortunately, as Russian democratic governance began visibly to stumble, questions arose about Russia's qualifications, commitments and overall preparedness.

It was a chicken and egg scenario. The issue of wounded Russian psychology and its belief that the West was seeking to consolidate its gains over a “defeated” Russia would colour for a decade or more the whole process of democracy development in Russia. The charge that outside support for democracy had a geo-strategic agenda directed against Russian interests challenged the legitimacy of Western activity in support of Russian civil society.

Restrictive laws and the harassment of NGOs and international human rights organizations through unnecessary tax audits and building code inspections began in 2006. The trend has culminated in drastically restrictive laws against freedoms of association, assembly and speech being adopted against NGOs in Russia in the summer of 2012, a course of action that has drawn open criticism and approbation from Western leaders, including directly at President Vladimir Putin.

NORM-GIVERS AND NORM-TAKERS

The misunderstanding between the West and Russia about original expectations was in part due to assumptions of Western democracies about the transition process. Finnish political scientist Sinikukka Saari (2009) of the Finnish Institute of International Affairs recalls how 1990s democratization theory assumed the goal was to assist transiting states and integrate them into multilateral institutions based on common (i.e., Western) values. Political theorists were tempted to proclaim that the process of development everywhere had “natural phases,” the ultimate of which would be full-fledged democracy. In this context, Westerners instinctively saw themselves as the norm-givers and transiting states as the norm-takers. Others have described this mindset as “putting our labels on things.”

It was a time when progress toward democracy was being euphorically depicted in Western commentary as “irreversible,” in that it was expected citizens would take to effective democratic behaviour naturally. While democratic institutions and a market-based economy were seen by IFIs as being interchangeably linked in a complementary package of reform objectives, the emphasis, and indeed the priority of Western governments seemed, in practice, to be on the “cure-all” effect of market forces. The point made strongly 20 years later — that market forces alone are not enough for success; they must be inclusive, including in benefits — was hardly gleaned by IFIs and most Western treasury departments (Aceomglu and Robinson, 2012). They held to the “Washington consensus” that policies devoted to economic growth and open markets mattered the most. This mantra presupposed the reach of markets into every aspect of life, as recounted by Michael J. Sandel (2012) much

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later. Journalist Thomas L. Friedman (2012) saw this as “partly a result of the end of the Cold War when America’s victory was interpreted as a victory for unfettered markets, thus propelling the notion that markets are the primary instruments for achieving the public good,” which seemingly was indifferent to social purposes and costs.

Overconfidence that the correct path of forward direction was so self-evident contrasted the evidence on the ground that reality was not turning out so well at all. The expectation of optimists in the West and of some reformers in Russia that the country could naturally accede to Western norms “took no account of a ruined economy, depleted and exhausted human capital and the mental and moral dent made by 70 years of Soviet rule” (*The Economist*, 2011). The inevitable shortfalls in economic reform had a devastating effect on the appetite for political reform. Russian realities provided a severe learning experience.

MORE SHOCK THAN THERAPY?

Soviet and then Russian citizens debated fairly existential choices in the first momentous years of change launched by Mikhail Gorbachev. An initial “500 Days Plan” headed by Grigory Yavlinsky foresaw conversion to a market economy, but as revealed earlier, Gorbachev dithered over concrete decisions. Others in the Politburo were openly opposed.

At this time in China, profound economic reforms initiated by Deng Xiaoping in 1978 were visibly taking effect without concomitant relaxation of political controls. But unlike China, the Soviet Union and then Russia, loosened political controls right off, with Western encouragement. As Leon Aron (2012) details, the effects of glasnost had created a clamour for freedoms across the board, but there was a vacuum of replacement institutions.

After Yeltsin dissolved the Soviet Union and replaced Gorbachev in the Kremlin, he appointed a new team of economic reformers who aimed to adopt more radical approaches for Russia, including “shock therapy” to replace Gorbachev’s more gradualist approach to economic reform.

There were many reasons the experience floundered, but all wrapped up in the unprecedented extent and scale of the transformation enterprise, whose nature is by definition as behavioural as it is systemic. As former US Deputy Secretary of State Strobe Talbott (2003) put it, “Russian reformers never figured out the right formula for mixing shock and therapy, but neither did the well-wishers, creditors, advisors, and would-be partners in the West.” Nor did practitioners have adequate experience or instinct for the practice of inclusive democratic governance.

Some Western economists, notably Jeffrey Sachs, had hoped to repeat the relatively successful reform experience of post-communist Poland, which had a much smaller economy and built-in civil society capacities supporting the less complex “shock therapy” reform process in Poland. Russian reformist Prime Minister Yegor Gaidar never had the extent of public support for his radical reforms as Polish Deputy Prime

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Minister Leszek Balcerowicz who had managed the reform process there. Overall, Russians felt more shock in these early years of reform than therapy and the political costs were high.

There has been a polemical debate as to whether the application of shock therapy in Russia failed because it was too drastic or, as free Lithuania's first Head of State Vytautas Landsbergis argued in 1994, because it was not drastic enough. The inarguable facts are that Russian society felt deeply and suddenly the cumulative impact of the elimination of price controls and state subsidies fuelling hyperinflation, which in turn destroyed savings. At the same time, essential social services such as health care were devastated by the radical loss of state financing. The disastrous result was what David Remnick (1994) termed "the wreckage of everyday life."

DIRE TIMES AND DRASTIC MEASURES

The public began to believe that the transformation of Russia was a project of unprecedented magnitude with uncertain outcomes. In the absence of positive results — indeed, faced with deteriorating social conditions — public support began to waver and then bleed away, declining sharply during 1992 with a majority coming to favour a more gradual approach. Dismay at deteriorated conditions was reinforced by the perception of brutally uneven application.

Most enterprises proved unprofitable. Enterprises that could turn a profit became controlled increasingly by single shareholders, some of whom conspired with regional governments to evade Moscow's tax and regulatory authority. Revenues of the state treasury were far less than expected or needed.

By 1995, reformers were faced with an eroding national financial situation. Politically, they also feared that because of the backlash, the Communist Party would win the 1996 presidential election and rescind much of the privatization accomplished. A hastily concocted loans-for-shares process — termed by Tony Judt as a "fire sale" without precedent — aimed to lock as much of industry as possible into private ownership before the 1996 election rescinded the privatization process. An additional rationale, as confided to US Ambassador Tom Pickering by a top Russian political strategist, was to obtain the financing necessary for an effective re-election campaign for the cash-strapped regime.

This headlong rush to privatize state assets without what is now acknowledged as the requisite institutional framework in law, regulation, financial institutions and infrastructure, as well as established behavioural capacity, resulted in massive gains for well-placed insiders who were the early winners, positioned to exploit the absence of controls and able to muscle positions of privilege and power out of the chaos.

Russian banks were offered shares in the most attractive dozen state enterprises in return for loans of US\$800 million to the Treasury. The banks then auctioned off the shares to insiders in a process that was anything but transparent. A relatively small number of insiders accumulated sudden and sizable personal wealth and power

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through ownership of companies that produced or acquired natural resources at artificially low domestic cost which they could then market abroad at vastly higher world prices.

Today, the perspective of time has favoured the emergence of an argument validating the reformers' long game on privatization, based on the evidence that the companies that then emerged, such as oil giants Yukos and Sibneft, and Norilsk Nickel gradually became much more efficient, despite the impropriety of their passage from the state to controlling shareholders.

This was not apparent at the time, as national economic trends deteriorated. Between 1990 and 1998, Russian GDP per capita dropped 42 percent. The 1990 level was not again reached until 2007. The overall impact of the early 1990s cataclysmic economic changes on Russia is estimated to have had double the effect that the 1930s Great Depression had on US society.

Defenders of the long game argue that these apparent national trends reflected, primarily, the discarding of hopelessly inefficient enterprises rather than the deterioration in the standard of living. It is true that for many Russians, despite negative GDP growth, quality of life improved in some significant respects, at least in major cities, as supply chains, freed from price controls, began to fill by-now privatized grocery shelves with a variety of goods actually unprecedented in Russia and as citizens were able to capitalize newly awarded personal residential property.

But politically, the exercise was a disaster, as far as public opinion was concerned. It solidified the impression of built-in unfairness. That impression eroded confidence in a democratic state, already sapped by social hardships. Indeed, a principal casualty of the whole process was the strength and integrity of the Russian state itself. As Aron (2012) described it, citizens felt that “the state had failed not only them, their village, or their town; it had let down an entire great country.” Restoring the state would become the central purpose of the post-Yeltsin era under Vladimir Putin.

Revisiting the Reform Experience in Russia

What explains a formula mix now seen as having underestimated social costs and damage to the state's integrity with a corresponding devastating political downside? Russian reformers were not oblivious to their lack of practical experience with reform. But urgency was on their minds. The reformers under Yeltsin knew their window of political opportunity would soon begin to close because of the buildup of opposition. Gradualism was not a formula which would meet their target of locking in defining policy changes as early as possible: “We decided to put all our eggs in one basket,” reformist Prime Minister Yegor Gaidar later recalled.

Privatization Chief (and later, First Deputy Prime Minister) Anatoly Chubais described the process as doing it “Canadian-style,” a reference that drove the puzzled Canadian ambassador to seek personal clarification. It was an ice hockey metaphor, the minister explained privately, drawing from the iconic and well-remembered 1972 USSR/Canada hockey championship, when the Soviet team's style of play aimed to control the puck, passing it back and forth until a perfect scoring opportunity

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emerged, contrasting the Canadians' style of shooting the puck to the Soviet end right away and chasing it pell-mell in the hope that unforeseen opportunities would emerge from the ensuing melee. "And", Chubais added, "Canada won." The Minister asked rhetorically, "How do you decontrol a society and economy in a controlled way?" It was a valid philosophical question, especially given that the full process had never been done before. As US Ambassador Jack Matlock allowed later, "There were no sure bets. Nobody had a road map."

The high point in reformers' expectations had occurred in 1992 under Gaidar, Chubais and Minister of Finance Boris Fyodorov. But once growing public dismay and political agitation (including the need to reach some accommodation with legislators) made Yeltsin sack Gaidar at the end of 1992 and replace him by former Party boss Viktor Chernomyrdin, any coherence shock therapy may have claimed was lost from that point on.

Obviously, the speed and scope of privatization in the hands of early winners playing only for themselves ran away from the reformers' intentions. Anatoly Chubais had hoped to encourage the emergence of Russian modern-day equivalents of US nineteenth-century "robber barons" like Carnegie, Ford, Leland Stanford or the Rockefellers who would leave behind a legacy of foundations, educational institutions and good works. Instead, Russia got their oligarchs.

The removal of controls also fostered a permissive culture of corruption that, for two decades, has affected virtually every aspect of Russian economic and also judicial life. The effect was to identify "democracy" for much of the public with disruption, crime and arbitrary unfairness, especially for powerless ordinary citizens and even honest business competitors.

EVENTS, EVENTS, EVENTS

Much has been written about (and by) Boris Yeltsin and his beliefs. Westerners who knew him well were convinced he had come to detest communism and had an instinctive and overriding conviction that citizens deserved fundamental rights: to vote out governments (though arguably not his), to free speech and to their own property. But beyond these broad principles, he did not embrace reform fully, proceeding in a staggered and often contradictory path while he confronted a cascade of momentous political events and developments.

By autumn 1993, political institutions of Russia were in collision. The Russian Congress of Deputies had been inherited from rules that applied in 1989 USSR. Reform-resistant deputies who had been "elected" according to those rules cited ample grounds in the still-applicable Soviet-era Constitution to deny President Yeltsin authorization for most reform projects.

One of Yeltsin's overriding objectives was, therefore, the replacement of the inappropriate Soviet Constitution by one representing Russia as a federal democratic state committed to the rule of law. Russian scholars and legal experts incorporated many of the best democratic principles into a document but old-line Duma members

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were vehemently opposed on this fundamental issue. Yeltsin moved to dissolve the Congress. The Head of the Constitutional Court, Valery Zorkin, sided with the Parliamentary leadership, which pushed through a vote ousting Yeltsin as president and declared Vice President Alexander Rutskoi in his place. Yeltsin, of course, rejected the Parliament's self-proclaimed authority.

President of the Parliament Ruslan Khasbulatov saw himself as Yeltsin's constitutional and political rival. With parliamentary approval, he mobilized the 5,000 strong parliamentary military guard armed guard that had been a legacy of the Supreme Soviet. Along with one of the 1991 coup organizers, General Vladislav Achalov, Vice President Aleksandr Rutskoi and various hardline agitators, he launched an insurrection.

Traumatized and disappointed citizens watched in trepidation on TV as flatbed trucks carrying heavily armed insurgents headed for the Ostankino television tower. On live TV, bodies fell to the ground as the tower's security guards put up a vigorous defence. Then, the shot-up TV station went off the air, leaving the public in the dark as to the outcome and desperately unsure how much of their democratic beginnings would survive the weekend.

After some apparent uncertainty, the Russian military, under General Pavel Grachev, moved decisively to support the government. By the time worried Russians awoke Monday morning, TV was back on the air and showed four T-80 tanks outside the "White House" as Parliament was then called. Khasbulatov and the heavily armed insurgents held out inside, refusing to give up their private arsenal of arms. The four tanks fired 12 shells, all but two dummies, but it was enough to end the crisis.

For hours, TV panels of traumatized citizens then struggled with the question of why Russians seemed cursed by an inability to behave like *normalniye lyudi* ("normal people") — generally understood as the citizens of Western Europe.

Chechnya

Crises have unintended consequences. In legislative elections in December 1993, the democrats were trounced by a combination of communists and extreme nationalists, a reflection of post-traumatic dismay with the dangers of reform processes that weren't understood. The outcome was also spurred by nationalists' denunciation of NATO's willingness to proceed with expansion to include former members of the Warsaw Pact.

Meanwhile, Russia's breakaway South Caucasus Republic of Chechnya revolted. The Kremlin's harsh but ineffective military response further conditioned events inside and outside the Russian Federation. The Chechen rebellion itself remains hard to characterize. For some, this was an act of self-affirmation by a proud and ancient Muslim people who had historically suffered greatly from tsarist and then Soviet domination, and were forced into mass exile. But the various rebel leaders and factions included many with criminal histories. The rebellion eventually attracted

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ex-jihadists who were veterans of the fight against the forsaken Soviet occupation of Afghanistan.

At this point, the Russian public, trying still to digest the breakup of the USSR, supported Yeltsin's refusal to tolerate a unilateral reduction of the territorial integrity of the newly minted Russian Federation, especially by force. The performance of the Russian military, however, in what is known as the First Chechen War, came as a rude shock both inside and outside of Russia. To minimize military personnel losses, the Russian Army relied extensively on heavy artillery and air power, destroying Grozny and displacing its entire surviving population. Loss of life was colossal. Both sides resorted to torture and arbitrary seizure.

Ultimately, a ceasefire was obtained. But heavy costs deepened. Inside Russia, Chechen militants performed acts of mass terrorism, leading to calls for a crackdown. Outside Russia, opprobrium over Russian methods began to colour relations with Western democracies. It weakened the Western aid effort in Russia. By 1999, recurring dismay over conduct in the Chechnya conflict caused the EU to limit new projects under the Technical Assistance to Commonwealth of Independent States program to those promoting human rights, rule of law and support for civil society. This essentially marked the end of general concrete support for Russian transitions, which had begun in earnest in 1991. By 2000, Western aid, such as it was, was winding down before an effective civil society in Russia able to anchor democratic structures had been built.

WESTERN AID: HOW MUCH AND HOW EFFECTIVE?

How much aid had been disbursed? The short answer is much less than believed. In April 1992, US President Bush announced that the United States would contribute US\$24 billion to support the reform process in Russia. US expenditure fell far short of that. Bilateral aid to Russia in the form of grants over the 10-year period from 1990 to 2000 was less than US\$5 billion, or less than one year's aid to Israel and Egypt at that time. Of this, only US\$130 million, or 2.3 percent, was devoted to programs directly supporting democratic reform (Stoner and McFaul, 2013).

The US Congress stayed generally opposed, reading US public opinion as being against cash grants to Russia. US President Clinton announced an effort to increase effective real aid, but ran into opposition in Congress and also fell way short. Yeltsin returned to Moscow in 1993 from his first summit meeting with Clinton with promises of just US\$1.6 billion, again much of it in the form of credits and food aid.

At the same time, Western countries insisted that the Russian Republic assume responsibility for Soviet foreign debt, which, at its peak stood at US\$97 billion, a sum far exceeding all disbursements in aid to Russia. Treisman (2012) asserts that "Russia was bullied into taking responsibility for the entire Soviet debt," though Russia itself saw merit in succeeding to the Soviet Union's status in other respects,

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such as permanent membership of the UN Security Council. In any event, that debt has now also been repaid in full.

On the size of the global support effort, a November 2000 report of the US General Accounting Office to the House of Representatives Committee on Banking and Financial Services cites a US government estimate of US\$66 billion through September 1998. G7 background papers indicate that, between 1991 and 1997, 30 countries and IFIs spent US\$50 billion in aid. Much of the aid was multilateral and in the form of loans, not grants. From 1990 to 2000, IMF aid of about US\$20 billion was directed to the central government of Russia, intended to support reforms aimed at controlling inflation and accelerating macroeconomic stability. By March 2005, rising oil revenue had permitted Russia to repay the IMF in full. For its part, the World Bank contributed about US\$12 billion, almost all of which has been repaid.

Whether multilateral or bilateral, the effectiveness of the aid was at best very mixed, largely because of what the Government Accounting Office report terms “no comprehensive strategy regarding the level, timing and priorities of assistance and how assistance would be coordinated” (Government of the United States, 2000).

The report (ibid.) itemizes the following items as “lessons” learned:

- An essential degree of consensus and political commitment within Russia was lacking.
- Donors underestimated the scale and complexity of the challenges.
- Russia had “almost no exposure to the western market culture and principles it set out to adopt, and with a vacuum in terms of internal institutions.”
- “The lack of a social safety net to cushion the impact of transition on workers and vulnerable groups...increased the social costs of transition [and] decreased public support for reform.”
- Programs were “sometimes poorly designed or implemented”
- “Russia’s transition path has been made harder by the concentration of power and income in the hands of a few....accelerated through the privatization [process].”

Janine R. Wedel’s (1999) earlier analysis had also described the “massive aid.... for market reforms [as] largely ineffective....plagued by a number of problems.... whether provided in the form of technical assistance, grants to political groups or NGOs, loans and guarantees to the private sector, or direct financial aid to post-communist governments.” Moreover, “because providing official funds to countries in transition is an inherently political process,” Wedel argues, “reform efforts often backfire when they are perceived to follow an agenda set by Western governments.” Wedel also suggests that “aid has become an end in itself, and, in prominent instances, has resulted in conflicts of interest or self-enrichment of aid-financed advisors.” This referred particularly to Harvard’s Institute for International Development, which won several non-competitive grants worth US\$40.4 million in fees to coordinate USAID’s US\$300 million economic development program, subsequently cited for

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“personal gain” and as support for “tycoon capitalism.” The argument is made that “Western consultancies probably profited more from Western aid packages than the Russians did” (Roxburgh, 2013).

For Peter Darby, a Russian/American banker who had returned to start up Dialog Bank, the aid amounted to a “slush fund” for consultants. Darby caused a stir among donor multilateral institutions when he refused their highly paid consultants further access to his premises until they demonstrated they understood conditions and realities of working in Russia, rather than parroting how they did things in the totally different business culture of New York or Frankfurt.

This goes to the vexing issue of “style.” As Roxburgh (2013) put it, “The West’s handling of post-Soviet Russia...has been just about as insensitive as it could have been...the overbearing and ultimately counterproductive tone that Washington and its allies took toward Moscow in the 1990s reinforced Russian insecurity and would later help to justify the reactionary and standoffish strain in Russia’s Putin-era foreign policy.”

Today, Clinton believes the US should have done much more to underwrite the transition. On multilateral aid, Talbott (2003) reports the president termed the IMF effort a “40-watt bulb in a damned big darkness.” Of course, it was a two-way street.

Russia needed to enact critical reforms for the aid to work. If Clinton is right that the IMF and the US “neglected the politics of it,” and “never really figured out how to insure that its money had an impact on ‘real people’ in Russia,” Russian reformers failed politically as well.

Because of expediency in the face of hostile opposition, the Yeltsin administration began to adopt what reforms they could by presidential decree, bypassing the Duma and other political stakeholders, and thereby reinforcing the political polarization that persisted throughout the 1990s. To succeed, Russian economic transformation needed the Duma from the outset to pass laws establishing clear legal regimes for property, contracts and taxation. Western democracies spent a lot of effort mentoring Russian officials on these topics. But in the divisive early years of the Yeltsin administration, opposition legislators were too preoccupied with their political goal of blocking the executive to pass the laws that would have made a significant economic difference.

Some significant Russian “reforms” were probably wrong-headed to begin with. Decentralization makes sense in a country as vast as Russia. But a strong case can be made that the decentralization of power away from the central state went too far, too fast, in favour of the regional governments, which were often co-opted by new business interests seeking to block the application regionally of Moscow-led reforms and necessary efforts to regulate industry. The combination of high speed privatization and decentralization enabled a pocket of insider and private interests to game the federal system by consorting with regional governors to avoid the authority of Moscow.

Based on interviews with 824 regional officials, Kathryn Stoner-Weiss (2004) concluded that the Russian state became gravely penalized by the loss of its ability

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to maintain a single economic expanse during this time of rampant change. And yet, some Western democracies, notably federal states such as Canada, tended to view Russian decentralization as a good in and of itself, and pursued extensive programs in support for federalism which took little if any account of the need of the central state to regulate economic activity on the periphery.

The notorious “loans for shares” policy initiative had been opposed by Larry Summers, Clinton’s deputy secretary of the treasury as “bad economics, bad civics, and bad politics.” Talbott later judged that “we, as the reformers’ constant backers and occasional advisers, should have debated it more with them.” But Talbott and others deferred to the argument that enabling a small class of oligarchs to amass fabulous wealth was part of the political struggle to prevent the return to power of the communists: “The importance of a victory outweighed our disagreement with them over some of the methods they were using to ensure that victory” (ibid.). In retrospect, he conceded it was a “debatable” thesis, even though a win for Gennady Zyuganov and the Communists would have been a grim outcome for the US and the democracy experiment in Russia.

Looking Away from Election Fraud

The Constitution of the Russian Federation, which Yeltsin wished to see the Duma adopt in 1993, (and which sparked the White House revolt) was adopted in a national referendum on December 12, 1993. It is emphatically democratic in its stipulation that Russia is a federal democratic state committed to the rule of law.

By 1996, Western democracies feared that the monumental “acquis” of this achievement was in jeopardy, because they feared the Communists would win the 1996 presidential election and repeal it. In the 1995 Duma elections, the Communists had won in 70 of Russia’s 89 regions with 25 percent overall. Vladimir Zhirinovskiy’s right-wing nationalists (the inaptly named Liberal Democratic Party) came in second with 11 percent. Liberals and democrats had been pushed to the margins.

There began a slippery slope. Post-Soviet scholars like Valerie Bunce, Steve Fish and others charge that preserving the democratic Constitution from repeal came at the expense of democratic behaviour. Russia would soon be on its way to becoming an “imitation democracy.”

Ultimately, Yeltsin did win the second round of the June 1996 presidential election with 54 percent. Western observers called the election free and fair, even though many irregularities were documented.

By the time of parliamentary elections in 1999, the administration had strengthened its unfair media control advantage. The Communists still led the vote count with a narrow plurality of 24 percent over Unity, the intended new “party of power” under Sergei Shoigu. The Council of Europe judged the election to have been “not fair, not clean” because of the “not honest” advantage in the media, but on the whole, “satisfactory.”

Successive parliamentary and presidential elections built on increasingly unfair advantage as a matter of routine, until the egregiously rigged ballot for parliamentary

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elections in December 2011 reached a tipping point. By then, Russia's democratic partners had to take a more principled and consistent stand. But this only deepened the strain in relations.

Disenchantment Turns Russians Against Western Democracy

A growing number of Russians believed charges that Westerners were promoting democracy in order to weaken Russia. 1996 presidential candidate Alexander Lebed (14.5 percent in the first round) had termed democracy "alien" to Russia. He easily outdistanced democrat Grigory Yavlinsky's vote count of only 7.3 percent. By the 1999 parliamentary elections, democratic Yabloko's support at the polls had dropped to only six percent.

Russian disillusion with the democratic experiment was largely due to the collapse in the Russian economic and social landscape, and the sense of improvisation that governed politics. As Trenin (2011) writes, "Most Russians did not so much want democracy with its rights balanced by responsibilities; its principles of accountability and participation; or freedom married to self-discipline. Rather, most people wanted to get rid of the oppressive and corrupt Soviet communism and step — as soon as possible — into a free world of material abundance. What they got instead was formal democracy, but also instant inequality, and, for some, real impoverishment. The fittest, who survived and succeeded, were not always the best. No wonder democracy soon lost its attractiveness to many ordinary people."

Russia's disappointment with the West was reflected by Yeltsin's withdrawal of his initial embrace and wish (initially renewed briefly by successor Vladimir Putin) to be "part of Europe" and the West. From Trenin's perspective, there followed an intermediate period of seeking balance with the West, then one of "non-alignment," which under Putin included efforts to create a Russian sphere of influence which in several ways aimed to parry Western policy objectives as a matter of perceived rivalry.

The international issues vexing to Russians are well-known — NATO's bombing of Serbia, the enlargement of NATO eastward, the anti-missile defence network to be set up in Poland and the Czech Republic, the invasion of Iraq, the recognition of Kosovo, the cultivation of what Russians viewed as anti-Russian personalities in Ukraine, Georgia and Poland — are among the most prominent grievances. Underlying them at the official level was resentment that Russia wasn't taken seriously by successive US administrations, especially when, after 2000, the Bush administration turned its back on joint exercises and a shared centre on missile defence. Nuclear issues had given the Soviet Union and its officials their exclusive superpower relationship to the US. The unilateral withdrawal of the relationship by the US seemed like a breach of faith. Complicating the picture was Russia's continuing difficulty in connecting darker realities inside Russia to its deteriorating image abroad.

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The leitmotiv of Russian politics after 2000, that the West sought to weaken Russia as a systematic policy aim, was reinforced by reaction to the growing Western criticism of Russia for human rights abuse (especially in Chechnya), rollbacks of democracy and chronic corruption. These failings were real enough but even if they were recognized as such by Russians, it didn't strike them they were so relevant to the conduct of bilateral relations.

Russians, disillusioned with democracy as they had experienced it so far, and resentful of Western support for democrats, launched the pushback against outside support on patriotic grounds of sovereignty defence which persists today.

The Positive Record for Operational Democracy Development Support, 1991-2000

If, at a policy level, the IFIs and national governments had been insensitive in their assumptions and prescriptions for Russian economic development, their efforts were overall more helpful than hurtful. Plus, on a practical level, there were multiple individual programs and projects that Russia's democratic partners had established over the decade to support Russian transitions, often at a local and even street level. Stopgap relief for unemployed factory workers, physicists, soup kitchens, women's shelters, orphanages, church restoration and a myriad of civil society projects issued from informal embassy programs. Whatever the criticism of their overall policy coherence and effectiveness, countless Russians were helped by such ad hoc efforts to bridge the enormous changes in their circumstances and build adaptive capacities for the future.

In many ways, they had a more marked public impact than the much larger-scale structured capacity-building programs for officials and professionals that began to proliferate in cooperation with state institutions and which suffered from the usual waste and inefficiencies of the kind we have seen in large-scale aid elsewhere, such as recently in Afghanistan. The early challenges of meeting short-term disbursement needs for transition support meant that Western aid operations had to seriously alter existing practices.

Aid projects for the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) were organized according to different principles and processes from development assistance projects normally. Donor governments did not have time to initiate projects in consultation with host authorities and send out tenders to potential project administrators and then to engage in lengthy analysis. Instead, most donor government programs were in response mode: they sought fast-disbursing proposals from "donor" civil society to partner a comparable activity or institution in the CIS. Universities, municipal councils and organizations, trade and professional associations, political parties, social policy advocates, policing experts, courts, all sorts of humanitarian assistance groups, and, inevitably, firms with financial, legal and organizational expertise bombarded the custodians of national programs, such as Britain's very successful "Know-How Fund," with ideas for partnering and mentoring.

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That these partnerships were often a profit centre for donor partners whose financing at home was under pressure from government austerity policies is indisputable, but the motivation to assist a historic and inspiring transformation was the driving factor.

One Western embassy recalls how small businesses with no foreign experience — a dry cleaner and a bagel bakery — set themselves up in St. Petersburg out of a simple desire to be of service. They succeeded — at least until local mafias were drawn to corral a piece of the cash flow. At this point, out of their depth, they sought the support of their embassy, which intervened with Mayor Sobchak, who in turn assigned the files to his new deputy, Vladimir Putin. These small businesses left Russia before long, but in their way, their hope of transmitting technique and process was fulfilled. That process was repeated throughout the service industry, with respect to standards of food safety, reliability of products and the cleanliness of locales. McDonald's may be taken to task for its menu's impact on nutritional health standards, but in Russia, where the Canadian subsidiary had to source all products from local producers because of currency exchange prohibitions, the company created a whole supply chain of small agricultural suppliers and a distribution network that transformed local communities.

The role that multinational extractive companies in the energy and mineral sectors can play in upgrading technical skills of the local labour and professional cadres is especially important. The boardroom clashes between outside investors and Russian joint venture partners have captured the headlines, but over time, joint ventures did enable many Russian operations to adapt to the requirements of economic efficiency, while already technically fluent workers adopted more advanced technical and governance standards which enabled their industries a faster acceleration to a competitive position internationally. The newly privatized oil and gas companies succeeded in modernizing. As Treisman (2012) says,

After consolidating control, the tycoons set out to restructure their companies and attract foreign investors. They introduced international accounting standards, appointed independent board members, hired experienced foreign executives. Yukos and Sibneft engaged the oil service firms Schlumberger and Halliburton to improve efficiency. The results were dramatic. Between 1996 and 2001, pretax profits of Yukos, Sibneft and Norilsk Nickel rose by 36, 10, and 5 times respectively (this despite only a modest increase in the oil price from \$21 to \$24 a barrel). Productivity rose much faster in oligarch-owned oil companies than in similar state-owned enterprises or firms led by “red directors.”

More Shock in 1998 and 1999

In 1998, after several years of declining growth had levelled off, Russia was whacked by the Asian financial crisis, which caused a sharp drop in the price of oil — from US\$23 at the end of 1996 to only US\$9 in 1998 — gravely affecting Russian finances. Russia's deficits also deepened because of the state's inability to collect taxes — the tax debts of enterprises amounted to six percent of GDP. Many foreign holders of short-term treasury bills (GKOs) decided to cash them in, which accelerated the deficit spiral as the government jacked up interest rates to over 80 percent.

Again, IMF support was inadequate. Though US\$22.6 billion was promised, less than US\$5 billion was made available in time to try to avert the crisis.

On August 17, Russia devalued the ruble and placed a 90-day moratorium on payment of foreign debts. Remaining GKOs were converted by fiat to long-term bonds at the expense of their holders. The social costs soared along with inflation. The political impact was vivid.

As Treisman (2012) reports it, “The financial crisis resulted in the final discrediting of the economic reformers still in government — Boris Nemtsov, Anatoly Chubais, and Sergei Kirienko. Nemtsov's prospects as a potential presidential candidate in 2000 dimmed, and the Yeltsin team's search for a successor focused even more than before on officials with a martial background. Absent the August default, the odds would have been much higher of a regime emerging that would have reconciled the creation of a more effective state with liberal democracy.”

Kosovo

In 1999, Serbia tried to expel from Kosovo its predominantly Muslim Kosovar residents toward Albania and Macedonia. Western democracies had ineffectively stood by over earlier Serbian atrocities at Srebrenica, failing to keep their promise to protect those who had fled to this designated “safe area.” But the Kosovar expulsions were judged intolerable across the European political spectrum because of the psychological connection the images of people forced from their home onto trains had to collective memory of the Holocaust.

Russia, however, vowed to veto a UN Security Council Resolution aimed at authorizing intervention by the international community. The bombing campaign went ahead under NATO without UN authority, but with a sense of moral legitimacy — at least in Western capitals. It lasted almost three months until June 1999, when former Prime Minister of Russia Viktor Chernomyrdin helped to broker the withdrawal of Serbian forces from Kosovo, permitting the return of the refugees. The next year, a democratic uprising in Serbia pushed its President Slobodan Milosevic from power.

Overall, the Russian experience with the aftermath of the breakup of the Yugoslav Republic contributed to a sense of being marginalized. The sentiment was deepened by NATO's eastward expansion in 1999 to the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland,

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formally adopted at the 1999 NATO Summit held during the unexpectedly prolonged bombing campaign of Serbia. Bristling at Western “regime change” would become a hallmark of Russian foreign policy, particularly after the invasion of Iraq and then the “colour” revolutions that Russian leaders ascribed to Western interference.

Putin Ascendant

Vladimir Putin joined the KGB in 1975. Posted to Dresden in 1985, he returned to his hometown of St. Petersburg in 1990 after the fall of the Berlin Wall. In Dresden, he had witnessed the collapse of the German Democratic Republic (GDR) first-hand. But within the GDR’s information bubble, he missed out on observing the heady years of glasnost in his home country (Hill and Gaddy, 2013).

By the time he returned to St. Petersburg, the local economy had broken down. Putin’s initial intention was to resume work on his doctoral dissertation on international trade at the Faculty of Law, and he soon also resumed his close relationship with his former mentor and law professor, Anatoly Sobchak.

As the mayor of renamed St. Petersburg, Sobchak boosted his city relentlessly, especially with foreign representatives. Sobchak recruited Putin to the city council. Before long, despite his KGB past, Putin won election as one of three deputy mayors, with particular responsibilities for external relations. Sobchak delegated to him contacts with Western diplomatic and business representatives. He impressed several by what appeared as candour and an ironic attitude toward his past. He seemed to have turned the page toward reform. When small foreign investors found themselves suddenly being squeezed by criminal extorters, Putin intervened effectively.

Putin’s attempts to manage a complex barter process to obtain food resources from abroad to replenish empty city stores were by all accounts less effective as unscrupulous dealers siphoned off funds and the food itself. Burned by the experience, the ex-KGB officer found himself reinforced in his former professional training to trust only closest associates. It encouraged him to develop a tough aptitude for keeping control in the rough-and-tumble environment of deals and intimidation characteristic of the new Russia in St. Petersburg as elsewhere. This reputation would stand him in good stead before long in Moscow.

After Sobchak lost his bid for re-election in 1996, Putin was recommended to some worried top reformers in the federal administration by Alexei Kudrin, a former colleague on Sobchak’s team and an economist of great competence who had joined Yeltsin’s immediate office.

Putin’s rise in Moscow was swift: by 1998, after a period on Yeltsin’s staff, the ex-KGB mid-level officer was appointed head of the (successor) security service, the FSB. In March 1999, he was awarded the chairmanship of the Russian Security Council, which coordinated national security activity, including national defence.

During 1999, the situation in Chechnya again darkened Russia’s political atmosphere. After the first Chechen War, Chechnya’s chronic lawlessness and serial terrorism had sufficiently abated to permit an election that was won, more or less fairly, by Aslan Maskhadov, a military commander of moderate views. But by the

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end of the year, an upsurge in kidnappings and a murderous incursion by warlord Shamil Basayev into the adjacent republic of Dagestan prompted Putin in his new position at the top of security to send Russian troops back into Chechnya.

In a tragic, dramatic and psychologically defining moment, bombs exploded in apartment buildings in Rostov, Moscow and Dagestan, killing over 300 people. A terrorized Russian public turned to the newly prominent Putin. Vowing to chase the terrorists down, to “kill them in their outhouses” (using a cruder term in Russian), Putin’s words and actions seemed chosen to position him in as just the man “with a martial background” the Yeltsin team had been looking for as a possible successor to the failing president. (There has been much speculation about whether FSB operatives, acting as rogue provocateurs or as part of a concerted plan even with the knowledge of Putin himself, carried out the bombings to create a sense of crisis and need: several journalists have attempted to document this thesis. The evidence adduced is unconvincing.)

Putin to the Kremlin

Vladimir Putin’s propulsion upward was fuelled by the sense of vulnerability felt by the Yeltsin family. It had the support of several key liberals in addition to Aleksey Kudrin, notably Andrey Illiaronov and Mikhail Leontyev. They had every reason to fear that Yeltsin and his family and allies might face a successor regime’s prosecution, unless the successor was himself an ally.

By first naming him Prime Minister, Yeltsin positioned Putin to become acting president, should the failing president voluntarily give up power. Yeltsin did so on the last day of the twentieth century, asserting in his TV address to the nation that Russia in the new millennium needed a younger leader. Meanwhile, Putin himself had released a lengthy essay in which he affirmed above all the need to resolve “the crisis of the destroyed state.”

Putin’s pole position made him the instant favourite to win the presidential elections on March 26, 2000. Though he had demurred initially, confiding prophetically that he “did not like elections,” he indeed emerged a clear winner, with 53 percent in the first round against communist Gennady Zyuganov. Russians welcomed the ascendance (and novelty) of a vigorous, abstemious, fit and obviously competent and articulate leader.

The Best Intentions...

President Putin promised in his acceptance speech that “the state will stand firm to protect freedom of speech, freedom of conscience, freedom of the mass media and property rights, those fundamental elements of a civilized society.” What happened to these categorical intentions? For Putin, the restoration of the state’s viability was the overwhelming priority. To him, this was a common cause for all Russians. Competition and dissidence were signs of disloyalty.

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Some argue that Vladimir Putin just didn't have the DNA for democratic behaviour, especially when it came with political competition. He was wired behaviourally in an earlier authoritarian time, was vocationally trained to distrust appearances and had no first-hand exposure to the heady days of 1987–1991, when Russians were questioning everything in an explosion of unaccustomed freedom of speech. His repeated lapses into authoritarian mode became an influence on, but also something of a metaphor for, his country's staggered efforts to transit to inclusive democratic behaviour. For Putin, the illiberal course he grew to follow may not have been his intention going in, but events convinced him.

A "Decade Lost for Politics"?

As Putin took charge, Russians felt relieved that they had at last earned some time free from crisis, drastic changes and existential questions — a "time of calming down" as Andrey Illianarov put it. The unfamiliar pleasures of private lives and personal freedoms combined with rising incomes to win a lot of support for the new president. He used it to gain a free hand in reshaping the political landscape.

Early in the new millennium, the Russian administration and the judiciary began to subtract from the democratic space opened earlier by Boris Yeltsin. Insiders within the system of non-inclusive "vertical power" worked to vest all significant authority in the Kremlin once again. Corruption also became generalized. An aura of impunity surrounded those holding the levers of power, supported by a politicized judiciary.

The poor reputation of the justice system was reinforced by the limp investigation and prosecution of murders of investigative journalists. Human rights organizations in the West radiated outrage at the killing of high-profile victims such as Anna Politkovskaya, Nataliya Estemirova, Paul Klebnikov and Yuri Shchekochikhin; indeed, over 500 Russian journalists died violently in the course of work in the two decades after the end of the USSR, many in Chechnya. In fact, the Putin and Medvedev administrations improved the rate of prosecution and conviction as time went on, but the impression persisted that authorities did not welcome journalists shining a light on criminal and corrupt behaviour. An official mindset devoted to information control masked an underlying inability to contemplate the real sharing of power.

Terrorism continued to shake citizens psychologically: 129 hostages and all 41 Chechen hostage takers died when the Dubrovka Theatre was seized in October 2002. In September 2004, 334 hostages, many of them children, died in another Basayev atrocity in the North Ossetian town of Beslan. A heavy-handed and botched use of force by security services contributed to the number of fatalities in both incidents, but also reinforced Putin's hard hand of control in the eyes of a terrorized public. The implicit contract that the Kremlin offered Russians seemed increasingly accepted: "Your lives will be good but leave politics to us." Those who strayed would receive a blast of intimidation.

TV AND OIL

Of course, it mattered greatly where they strayed. Founding oligarchs tried to get involved in broadcasting. Boris Berezovsky had bought the main TV channel, ORT, and Vladimir Gusinsky the principal independent network, NTV. Earlier, both had been instrumental in helping Yeltsin to win a second term in 1996, but shortly after Putin's inauguration in 2000, tax police raided NTV and its parent company Media Most, in what seemed to be political retaliation for critical reporting on the administration's handling of (and even involvement in) the Ryazan apartment bombing, as well as having supported the opposition in December 1999 Duma elections. Gusinsky was arrested and forced to sell his media empire to state energy giant Gazprom (to which NTV was considerably indebted). This placed Russia's biggest media group under the Kremlin's direct control.

Berezovsky soon followed Gusinsky into exile after retaliation against him after his TV network ORT attacked Putin for what it termed callous incompetence and initial presidential nonchalance over the ghastly sinking of the submarine Kursk in August 2000, which cost 188 sailors' lives. Berezovsky was forced to concede ORT to the state.

This completed the state's near-monopoly of control of Russian TV. While print media continued to contain pockets of independent reporting, notably *Novaya Gazeta*, where Politkovskaya had done her investigative work before being murdered, newspapers had ceased to be a major source of news for Russians who overwhelmingly relied on TV. The radio station Ekho Moskvy won great credibility among democrats but was little heard outside the capital, though it was streamed on the Internet to a wider audience avid for objective reporting.

The case of Yukos CEO and billionaire "oligarch" Mikhail Khodorkovsky has received vast coverage. He had been one of the principal beneficiaries of the "loans for shares" scheme which enabled him to control first a bank, Menatep, and then what was to become the world's fourth-largest energy company. Khodorkovsky began to get involved in "politics," first as a benefactor of various civil society causes and then as a financial backer of political opponents of the Putin regime, from the Communist Party to democratic Yabloko. Indeed, the Communist bloc in the Duma on one occasion voted against bills to increase the tax take on energy companies for that reason. At the same time, Khodorkovsky dared to criticize the regime for high-level corruption. He was careless in allowing it to be known he was contemplating entering politics himself and even a run at the presidency. Once he began to explore with Exxon Mobil and Chevron Texaco willingness to take a major stake in Yukos, Khodorkovsky was arrested. Putin was demonstrating to other oligarchs that the political game was off limits.

Putin also rearranged political institutions in Russia to centralize control in the Kremlin's "vertical of power." Putin appointed "super governors" to oversee the country's 89 regions. The Federation Council, the Parliament's upper chamber, would henceforth be appointed by Putin rather than by the regions. To some extent,

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these changes, complemented by an increase in the central government's share of taxes, corrected what had been seen as an excessive swing toward the regions at the expense of effective management of the country, but they were also at the expense of democracy.

President Putin and the Outside

President Putin initially sought better relations with the West, telling his first visitor, NATO Secretary-General George Robertson, that he wanted Russia to be a "part of Europe." Washington's non-committal response to Russian overtures had the effect of reinforcing Putin's intuitive distrust of US sincerity and indirectly of inclusive and competitive democracy which Washington seemed always keen to promote.

Later, Putin entertained inflated expectations that his immediate support offered US President George W. Bush after the attacks of 9/11 would make a lasting and rewarding impression, consolidating a special relationship, including on the threat of Sunni jihadism, which had, in Putin's mind, been the principal force behind Chechen separatism. Instead, the US proceeded with the invasion of Afghanistan without seeking much advice from Russia (or anyone else). Washington then severed a number of US-Russia nuclear weapons agreements, most prominently the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty, while continuing to lecture Russia about its behaviour in its own region.

The impact was cumulative. As Treisman (2012) puts it, "By his second term, Putin clearly felt he had been played for a fool, shown up as naïve in hoping for a real partnership with the United States. This doubtless left him vulnerable to the arguments of the conservative generals who had warned against trusting the Americans all along." On the other hand, Moscow had been grudging in meeting US requests for ease of transport access into Afghanistan. There was vexing behaviour on both sides.

Did nothing remain from the investment and efforts to build trust by US presidents George H. W. Bush and Bill Clinton, chancellors Kohl and Schroeder, prime ministers Major and Blair, presidents Mitterrand and Chirac, Prime Minister Prodi, prime ministers Mulroney and Chrétien, NATO Secretary-General Solana, IMF Chief Camdessus and initially George W. Bush, as well as many other leaders beyond the G7, to consolidate a positive partnership with Russian leaders?

The personal and political investment made by these various partners didn't naturally translate into working political capital with Yeltsin's successor, who hadn't himself been part of the narrative. Coming in, Putin's politics drew from the palpable public mood of growing nationalism prompted by a bristling national psychology that appealed to his own instincts and training. As it became increasingly evident he didn't, in any case, have in his bones the sort of natural instinct for democracy that Western partners had grown used to with Boris Yeltsin, Russia's backward steps on democracy aggravated already testy relationships with Western partners. These

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became more vexed when Russia made it apparent it was turning away from the West, having abandoned any ambition to be part of the European family.

Initially, NATO's 1999 enlargement to include the Czechs, Hungarians and Poles had been jarring to Russian psychology, but in a few years, even the Kremlin had come around. At the 2003 NATO Summit in Prague, however, the decision to admit the three breakaway Baltic republics from the USSR itself (in addition to Bulgaria, Romania, Slovenia and Slovakia) cut Russian psychology more deeply, especially as Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia were engaged in disputes with Russia. Long-standing Baltic bitterness over the forced annexation of the three countries into the Soviet Union had never receded, and Baltic voices added something of a specialized anti-Russian chorus to NATO's ranks, which Russian media amplified out of all proportion.

In 2003, the joint US-UK invasion of Iraq drew support and troops from all recent entrants to NATO ("New Europe") and from aspirants such as Ukraine and Georgia. Their zeal was rewarded, at least implicitly, by US alignment with their declarations of concern over Russia's threat in their own region.

Saddam Hussein had been a Soviet ally, but Gorbachev had been able to agree in 1991 he should be thrown out of Kuwait by a very broad UN-mandated international coalition. In 2003, however, Russia and most other UN members, including half of NATO — "Old Europe" plus Canada — were not able to agree whether Hussein's regime should be toppled by force in Iraq without evidence of a clear and present danger to neighbours and evidence of weapons of mass destruction (WMD). That the invasion became mired in an incompetent occupation and a tragic civil war may have given some satisfaction to Russian policy makers, but the principal effect was to erode even more any remaining trust in US intentions, especially when it came to rhetoric about democracy promotion. The "coalition's" massaging of disinformation about Iraqi WMD and the whole mismanaged venture blew wind into Russian nationalist sails. Russia's choice to be essentially unaligned with the West was confirmed from this point on.

Ukrainian elections in 2004 drained Russian trust further. The episode also exposed chronic blind spots in Russia's ability to analyze events objectively. As the *Handbook* case study on the Ukraine and the "Orange Revolution" shows, Western interest and activity was not to promote regime change, but rather to support the right of Ukrainian citizens to avert and then to protest a flagrant electoral fraud. However, Putin seemed unable to credit the protests as sincerely meant, though he had to know the extent of the fraud in question. Indeed, the technique of vote rigging used by Kuchma/Yanukovich resembled what OSCE observers judged had been done in Russian parliamentary elections in 2003, which they had termed "not free, not fair." In March 2004, Putin had himself been re-elected president with a tally over 70 percent, but in a way the OSCE declared "overall did not adequately reflect principles necessary for a healthy democratic election process." Putin's sole focus was on the possibility that protests could deny the Russian-supported candidate

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Yanukovych the prize that his Russian neighbours had so dearly sought and assumed would be his. Putin had heavily invested his own prestige in a Yanukovych victory.

After exit polls showed Yushenko had won, rigged official results that had awarded the victory to Yanukovych were nullified. In the mind of the president of the Russian Federation, Yushenko's victory in the re-run December 26, 2004, by 52 to 44 percent, was another example of Western pursuit of regime change.

Putin's inability to view events without the lens of imagined Western agitation blinded him to genuine public indignation at cheating and signalled a pattern that would repeatedly colour his view of protest in Russia itself several years later. He has frequently shown reluctance to accept motivations at face value, ascribing intentions to deeper and darker agendas.

The Ukraine experience especially alerted the Kremlin at home to prepare defences against the mobilization of younger citizens by foreign-funded NGOs via the "Orange threat" which was allegedly stimulated and financed by government-backed Western advocacy NGOs. The pro-Kremlin Russian nationalist youth movement Nashi ("Ours") was created by the presidential *apparatus* as a counterforce. It was used as a weapon against Russian activists, NGOs enjoying Western support, and even Western diplomats, such as UK Ambassador Tony Brenton in 2007, whose embassy was accused of financing Russia's political opposition.

Other disagreements between Western democracies and Russia followed. The harsh interruption of Ukrainian gas supplies from Russia on January 1, 2006, was a function of Russia's wish to lift CIS-subsidized prices for gas to market rates. Russian suppliers who cut off the vital shipments cost Russia its reputation for reliability of supply. The heavy-handed tactics made it easier for adversaries to label Russia a "threat," which in turn made Russia feel unfairly maligned. The crisis over the recognition of Kosovo following the Kosovar unilateral declaration of independence on February 18, 2008 roiled the waters further and ultimately had an impact on the "frozen conflicts" over Russian enclaves that were seeking their own independence from adversarial Georgia. But that crisis would take place in the tenure of a new Russian president. Vladimir Putin stepped down from the presidency because of term limits. He ceded the presidency to his former chief of staff, whom he replaced as prime minister.

Tandem Politics: The Medvedev Presidency

Dmitry Medvedev was elected March 2, 2008, with 70 percent of the popular vote. The Medvedev years represented the appearance of dilution of top-down insider "vertical power" control associated with Putin, but, particularly in retrospect, it was more a matter of appearances than one of a changed reality. Each of the two principals seemed to tailor messaging to different respective constituencies: Medvedev to the upwardly mobile urbanites, and Putin to his own numerically larger and more conservative rural and small-town base in the regions.

President Medvedev's messaging sought to convey a reformist theme. He was a more contemporary figure whose taste for Western rock music reflected the

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experience of a younger man who had lived the explosion in the 1980s of euphoric glasnost that Putin had missed. Shortly after the election, he declared (notably at the Fifth Krasnoyarsk Economic Forum, 2008) his commitment to supporting “freedom in all its manifestations, personal freedom, economic freedom, and finally, freedom of expression.” In practical consequence, though, the commitments did not extend to freedom of open competition for political power.

In the same speech, he condemned Russia’s culture of “legal nihilism.” A former professor of law, he tried to make the creation of an effective independent and professional judiciary a hallmark of his term. He spoke out openly against corruption, which he judged “characterizes the life of Russian society.” But by 2011, he had to admit his government had failed in its anti-corruption policies. He also attempted reform of Russia’s political institutions, reinstating direct election of regional governors. But his tone was more conciliatory than that of his predecessor — now prime minister — who spoke of NGOs and civil society with open derision. Medvedev tried to open a sincere dialogue with them.

NGOs AND CIVIL SOCIETY IN RUSSIA

A non-governmental advocacy sector had emerged from the reforms of the 1980s and early 1990s. Its first urgent civil preoccupation was to extract truth about the Soviet Union’s repression and to move toward some sort of closure in justice. The NGO Memorial became the conscience of Russia’s past and its archivist, earning the hostility of increasingly reactionary state security authorities.

As reforms proceeded, the ambit of civil society began to widen considerably, taking up advocacy for human, economic and other rights going forward, as well as the need for transparency and fairness in the exercise of Russia’s institutions. The Moscow Helsinki group, for example, focussed on the need of an independent and professional judiciary. Informal protest movements, such as the movement of mothers of conscripts against the Chechnya war and later movements opposing environmental damage, spontaneously sprang up.

However, the NGO sector never constituted a united front. After several generations of forced regimentation, there was always a preference among Russian social activists for informality and individual protest as opposed to hierarchy. Nor were the NGO sector’s roots deep. Chronic fragmentation made civil society easier to marginalize in the inevitable confrontation between the administration and activists and advocates associated with the very disparate NGO movement. Despite Medvedev’s surface moderation, authorities seemed to relish the adversarial relationship in which the state cast itself as the “patriotic” party, while increasingly assigning advocacy NGOs the role of handmaidens to “foreign” democratic interests, a tendency that ramped up considerably after Putin’s humiliation over the Orange Revolution in Ukraine in 2004.

Ultimately, there were over 2,000 loosely connected NGOs dealing with democracy and human rights issues. The government largely ignored their

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substantive concerns, increasingly preferring to denounce them as “foreign agents.” After the Orange Revolution, Nashi conducted a counter-campaign in the streets to intimidate foreign-funded NGOs and even, as mentioned earlier, in 2006 directly harassing UK Ambassador Brenton for “interference in Russian politics.”

The Kremlin sought to keep Russians under its boot and foreign democracies on notice that they were to mind their own business. As another gesture to make the point, the offices of the British Council were closed on phony pretexts of “non-payment of taxes.”

In 2006, the Duma adopted a law obliging NGOs to disclose all sources of funding and to ensure their activities complied with Russian “national interests.” The law was enforced with great energy; over 13,000 NGO inspections and audits for taxes and violations of building or fire safety codes were conducted in the first year alone. International NGOs such as Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, Médecins sans Frontières, and various humanitarian and refugee groups had to halt their work temporarily.

Objectionable “political activities” of Russian NGOs were defined as almost any attempt to influence government policy or public opinion. In 2008, Memorial’s headquarters and archive in St. Petersburg were raided and invaluable records destroyed.

The non-state European University in St. Petersburg, which had received grants from the Ford and MacArthur foundations, was cited for 52 fire safety violations and forced to close immediately. The university’s offence had been to accept a €700,000 grant from the EU to support research on election monitoring. The university could open its doors after two months, only after renouncing the grant and activity in question (and after the March 2008 election of President Medvedev). Despite the official harassment, which continued even as President Medvedev was himself meeting with NGO leaders, civil society in Russia began to strengthen in numbers, competence and self-confidence.

In interviews with the *Handbook* project in Moscow in the winter of 2011-2012, NGO representatives emphasized their much greater self-reliance. As one activist put it, the previous decade may have been “lost for politics,” but not for the development of “civic skills.” Analysts captured the extent to which Russian civil society had “grown up” over the period. Joshua Yaffa (2012) underlined that “apathy and individualism...[were] finally giving way to civic consciousness.”

At the same time, however, NGO activists, in conversation with the *Handbook* authors, asked if there had been sufficient soil for civil society’s roots to take hold. Government pressure, restrictions, name-calling, and punitive tax and other campaigns against NGOs meant that supportive foreign financing from Western governments fell away, though in some cases private outside support was tolerated. Some groups, such as the Moscow School, a reform-oriented think tank and training centre with prominent Western support, and the Eurasia Foundation, found their activities constrained by lack of funds. For others, small-donation private charity from Russian citizens began to take up the slack, facilitated by the Internet, but it

was hard to gain traction. NGO advocacy spread from Moscow and St. Petersburg and became increasingly visible in Russia's regions, constituting today a local force to be reckoned with in provincial capitals such as Kazan, Perm, Nizhny Novgorod and Novosibirsk.

"A National Mood Can Change"

Despite the economic and social turmoil of the 1990s, and evidence of wide disappointment in the way the democratic experiment was handled, joint polling by the Centre for the Study of Public Policy at the University of Strathclyde and the Levada Centre of Moscow show that two-thirds of the public has nonetheless maintained the belief that "Russia needs democracy" at more or less constant levels over 20 years. A survey by Henry Hale of the Elliott School at George Washington University found that 87 percent of Russians wanted their president chosen by free and fair elections. On the other hand, as Treisman (2012), citing Levada polling, puts it, "Russians are unhappy about the actual practice of democracy in Russia."

In interviews in February 2012, Levada polling experts told the *Handbook* project that, contrary to assumptions, this unhappiness had become prevalent in rural as well as in urban sectors. The difference is that outside the major cities (where demonstrators in 2011-2012 carried signs urging "Russia Without Putin"), rural and regional publics wary of agitation wanted to rely on the ability and willingness of the Putin regime itself to improve democratic practice. This was consistent with Pew Center polls in the spring of 2011, which showed deep dissatisfaction with the "way things were going," but a simultaneous belief that "a strong leader" represented the best way forward for the country.

Events over the winter of 2011-2012 cast a new light on these assumptions, at least for a time. On September 24, 2011, Prime Minister Putin casually broke the news that he and President Medvedev had conferred and agreed that Putin would once again be the candidate for the presidency in spring 2012 elections, on the grounds that he had the higher public approval rating of the two. Moreover, the prime minister continued, their decision had been taken a year earlier.

The public impact of this decision was wholly unanticipated by the Kremlin. While Putin's return to the top position was not a great surprise, multiple interviews revealed the extent to which people felt "duped" by the way this was done, the sense of entitlement it conveyed, as well as the apparent assumptions at the top about the electorate's "political infancy." A deceived public looked to parliamentary elections on December 4, 2011 as the opportunity to voice protest.

In those elections, the party of power, United Russia, lost 77 seats in official tallies. Its popular vote dropped from 64 percent to under 50 percent (despite an officially recorded score of 99.5 percent in Chechnya), sinking to below 40 percent of the popular vote in Moscow and Leningrad regions. It became increasingly obvious that even these official results had been falsified to inflate United Russia's score. Exit polls seemed to suggest that the accurate overall score for United Russia would have been about 35 percent (Shevtsova, 2012).

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The authorities had never intended a fair contest. Pre-election arrangements had, as usual, worked to the distinct disadvantage of opposition parties: their publicity was seized by authorities, rallies were forbidden or interrupted, candidate registrations refused and access to TV barred for their competitive political messages. The openly biased electoral commission distributed 2.6 million absentee ballots, enabling holders to vote anywhere, directly to United Russia, which bussed convenience voters in to wavering districts from outside. The OSCE delivered a scathing report of the entire electoral process. Until its website was blocked, Russian election watchdog, the GOLOS Association documented violations, reinforced by YouTube videos showing blatant ballot stuffing.

Repression of dissent deepened. Independent radio station Ekho Moskvyy was shut down. “Denial-of-service” website attacks were launched against independent media such as the magazine *New Times*, whose Editor-in-Chief Evgenya Albats had launched an analysis of fraudulent vote-counting patterns. Western democracies expressed “serious concerns” (US Secretary of State Clinton), to which the Russian administration responded with hostility, accusing the countries in question of having spent “hundreds of millions” to try to influence Russian politics.

The day after the election saw the beginning of a popular eruption which, over the course of the next three months, brought between 70,000 and 120,000 protestors out on several occasions (December 10, 24; February 4; March 5, 10). While these demonstrations did not match the crowds of half a million or more attained in 1990-1991, they signalled that the decade “of sleep” was over. Lilia Shevtsova (2012) has termed it “the end to the postcommunist status quo.” Russian writer and activist Viktor Shenderovich captured the mood, declaring that a “point of no return has been passed.”

The effect was to break the regime’s sheen of popularity and invincibility for many citizens. The childish election mismanagement exposed Putin’s “managed democracy” as inherently fraudulent and insulting in its confidence that voters would settle for the illusion of choice. The Kremlin’s reaction to the protest movement was counterproductive. Instead of acknowledging voters’ dissatisfaction (even on the basis of official results) and addressing it, Prime Minister Putin indicated that public opinion was of little concern to him. He excoriated NGOs, framing them as “Judases” who took money from the West (prompting a variety of protestors’ signs asking “Hillary! Where’s My Money?”).

THE PUBLIC HAS ITS OPINIONS

Who were the demonstrators? Surveys revealed them to be, in the main, from an educated and professional class for whom the bargain of private prosperity in exchange for surrendering real political choice was no longer acceptable. Putin depicted the protestors as selfish urban elitists, setting them up against the Russian non-urban “narod.” In doing so, he applied the accusation of non-patriotic behaviour

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to a vastly wider swath of society, which he had earlier used only to try to marginalize NGOs.

The prior gulf in attitude between urban and non-urban and poorer populations had narrowed. Levada polling in February 2012 showed that discontent was generalized. Only 14 percent of Russians expressed belief that Putin had the “best solutions” for Russia. By March 2012, only 23 percent expressed a positive view of those in power. Only five percent had confidence that those in government “are concerned with the well-being of ordinary people.”

Mikhail Dmitriev and Daniel Treisman (2012) published results from a survey of 62 focus groups drawn from the residents of 16 Russian regions. These, too, confirmed that the shift in public opinion in favour of freedom and democracy has especially animated a professional urban class that had most benefitted from consciousness-raising via the technological revolution in communications (60 percent of all Russian households have personal computers), widespread foreign travel and generalized economic empowerment. But the results also underlined that a wish for change is felt across the country. Dmitriev and Treisman (2012) write:

The answers were surprising. Yes, Russians outside Moscow and St. Petersburg have no appetite for the noisy street politics and abstract slogans of their big-city counterparts. (The March survey by Levada showed 52% of Russians opposed the demonstrations, compared with 32% who supported them.) But they are far from content with the current political system, which they see as hopelessly corrupt and inept at providing basic services.... Like the liberal activists, Russians from other parts of the social spectrum exhibit a powerful desire for change. But their focus is quite different. Whereas the Moscow crowds have rallied behind abstract concepts, such as fairness and democracy, much of the rest of the country is fiercely non-ideological and cares far more about concrete, local issues. Across different regions and social classes, Russians are most concerned with the state’s dwindling ability to provide essential services, such as health care, education, housing, personal security and effective courts.

But it is also worth noting that in the survey they reported that “Suspicion of the West was one area in which Putin’s rhetoric struck a chord with the focus groups” (ibid.). That psychological theme which had played such a role over the previous 20 years — not to mention during Soviet times — promised to be a bell which the Russian leadership could continue to ring for popular support.

This may account for the restrained Western reaction to Vladimir Putin’s re-election in March 2012, with an official tally of 63.8 percent — thereby avoiding the necessity of a second round. Once again, watchdogs such as GOLOS and Citizen Observer dissented, estimating from exit polls that voter support was 51 percent and 45 percent, respectively. They each concluded that billionaire Mikhail Prokurov,

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who was parachuted in as an opposition candidate to give the illusion of choice (after such well-known democratic figures as Grigory Yavlinsky and Boris Nemtsov were disqualified by authorities), had his vote reduced to seven percent from 16 to 22 percent. Russian analysts close to the regime contest these revisionist figures, claiming that GOLOS and Citizen Observer overemphasize the Moscow and St. Petersburg results in their numbers. In any event, Vladimir Putin would have won the election by the second round, if not outright in the first.

THE RETURN

The post-election question was whether President Putin would attempt to reconcile with the alienated urban middle classes, or whether the dislike of political competition he had demonstrated since 2000 would persuade him to be more confrontational.

Whereas the police had been surprisingly restrained in handling earlier demonstrations, the repression of protests on May 6, 2012 against the returned President's inauguration was brutal. More generally, a pattern developed of arrests of opposition leaders and personalities, such as Alexei Navalny, Boris Nemtsov, Kseniya Sobchak and Gennady Gudkov, as well as the intimidation of NGOs and civil society.

Politically, Putin appeared to have abandoned the pretense he was the leader of all Russians, dividing Russia between his supporters and the "bad Russians" who aligned against him, and whom he accused of acting on behalf of foreign powers to weaken Russia.

A new law on NGOs was adopted by the Duma in July 2012, forcing NGOs accepting financial support from abroad to register as "foreign agents," and to accept a heavy burden of financial reporting and constant audits and inspections. Failure to comply exposes managers to prison sentences. In fact, NGOs were hardly a factor in the public protests of the winter, but it suited the Kremlin's narrative to attempt to demonize them. Dozens of NGOs — including major advocates such as GOLOS, Memorial, and Agora (legal assistance for protestors), but also environmental defence groups and even the Kostroma Soldiers' Mothers Committee — were warned they faced sanctions.

In May 2013, Levada was informed by prosecutors that it could not continue to publish its polling results without identifying itself as "a foreign agent." The prosecutors ruled the centre "influences public opinion and therefore does not constitute research but political activity." According to Levada, however, foreign sources constitute no more than three percent of its funding, mainly via the Open Society Institute Foundation and the Ford and McArthur foundations. Losing the independent source of public opinion surveys would be, according to Levada Director Lev D. Gudkov, the "end of an epoch that began with Gorbachev's perestroika.... Russians would be restricted to a one-sided picture....like the Soviet time, when there was one newspaper, *Pravda*, and one TV channel" (cited in Barry, 2013b).

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Russian officials also shut down foreign-financed humanitarian aid operations, including UNICEF and USAID. Under the umbrella of the new legislation and new official mood, Russian agencies began to freelance in intimidation tactics in strange ways. The Federal Security Service of the Russian Federation (FSB) announced in October 2012 that 20 non-governmental humanitarian aid organizations operating in Ingushetia would be shut down. In 2013, a pattern emerged of hostile forensic visits from the state prosecutor's office, the FSB and tax officials to foreign NGOs like Human Rights Watch, Amnesty and the Konrad Adenauer Foundation.

Yuri Sheryshev, local spokesman of the FSB, explained to the Interfax news agency that “it would be naïve to think that foreign organizations allot large sums of money to non-governmental organizations for democracy development. By declaring some high goals of their work, they in fact collect intelligence for foreign states.” This is precisely President Putin's mindset.

All governments are liable to occasional misstatement of intention from individuals but the underlying assumption of this declaration — paranoid as it appears — unfortunately fits into a pattern of fostering suspicion and “spy mania” that is a frontal challenge to the whole premise of the legitimacy of support for democracy development from outside.

GOING FORWARD

The activities of foreign democracies in support of democracy development are now severely circumscribed by Russian authorities. Russian authorities have made it illegal for any “politically engaged” NGO to receive foreign funds. More than 2,000 Russian NGOs are engaged in one form or another in political advocacy.

But NGOs in Russia have repeatedly told the *Handbook* that the last two decades have in fact enabled them to attain a degree of empowerment that will favour human rights defence and the expansion of democracy in the country. Building the capacity for self-sufficiency is ultimately the shared goal of all concerned.

Western democracies assert a need to continue being vigilant in support of civic and NGO rights and of the general human rights climate in Russia. The regime has tolerated some egregious crimes, such as the non-prosecution of those responsible for the arrest and death of Sergei Magnitsky.

The US Congress should have repealed the Soviet-era Jackson-Vanik Act, which made economic ties with Russia conditional on the right of dissidents to emigrate, 20 years ago. Emigration from Russia is free and frequent. But Cold War mentalities in the Congress blocked repeal. Today, the Act is being replaced by the Magnitsky Act, tying bilateral economic benefits to transparency in human rights and imposing sanctions for offence. It specifically targets Russian officials presumed to be involved in the acts of corruption that Magnitsky sought to expose.

It is assumed that much of Russia's pressure on NGOs is in retaliation. Russia objects to a foreign parliament passing laws against Russian nationals who have not been convicted of crime in a court. That prosecution of the crimes in Russia has been

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negligible seems irrelevant to Russian official reasoning. The Russian Duma has since adopted a law preventing Russian orphans from being adopted by US nationals as some kind of symmetrical response.

The Duma, under the control of the party in power in the Kremlin, has adopted other reactionary and xenophobic legislation, anti-gay and specifically anti-American: anyone with a US passport, for example, cannot participate in a Russian organization that is politically engaged. Moreover, foreign passport holders are prevented from public commentary on Russian events on television.

The appeal of such reactionary and defensive measures seems to be rooted in an official drive at the top to tap into support for traditional Russian values, and especially Orthodox Christianity. The severe prosecution of the punk rock group Pussy Riot for desecrating a holy site by a provocative anti-Putin improv stunt can be seen in this light.

Much comes down to the personal role of the Russian Federation's president. Vladimir Putin's popularity with the Russian electorate, which was in the 80-percent approval range at one time, had been earned. Between 1998 and 2008, real household incomes rose 140 percent. Poverty fell dramatically. Oil-rich nations have typically been "extractive" in regard to the benefits, but Russia re-channelled oil revenue (which represents 40 percent of government spending) to public services. In the last decade, pensions have been significantly increased six times. Today, the president's approval rating has declined, though it is no doubt still at a respectable 50 percent or more.

The issue for democracies is not to pretend otherwise or to suggest that voter discontent with their governance (which is every bit as high in Western democracies) is of itself a legitimate reason for outside concern. The issue for the international democratic community is that democracy and democratic values are still being rolled back in Russia. Russian self-correction will be up to Russians themselves. As Dmitri V. Trenin (2013) wrote in an op-ed, "Russia is for Russians to fix. Outsiders can influence Russian development only on the margins and not always positively."

Russia retains respect as a great country, and effective relationships with it are vital to international security. Strategic partnerships are called for, but democracies have learned from experience in supporting dictatorships for the sake of wider strategic interests, that such political investment cannot be at the expense of democratic values. The question is how democrats everywhere can legitimately show their solidarity and support of civil society in Russia.

PART II: DIPLOMACY ON THE GROUND

THE DIPLOMAT'S TOOL BOX: RESOURCES AND ASSETS

Today, diplomats from democracies stationed in Russia are operating in a “twilight zone” of what is locally permissible, in terms of public outreach and direct connection to Russian civil society. They report that their determination to sustain solidarity with those in Russia arguing for the right to pursue democratic principles is more than ever pertinent to their diplomatic presence. However, pushback from Russian authorities is a direct challenge to the very premises of public diplomacy. In practice, the diplomats balance their refusal to operate in secrecy on issues of basic values (“We’re not out to hide anything,” in a Canadian’s words) with the need for discretion.

The Support of Home Authorities

In terms of effective policy support for initiative in the field, the support of home authorities is more than ever a vital asset for diplomats in the field.

Though the EU discontinued its already truncated bilateral government-to-government cooperation program in 2010, after Russian authorities declared they no longer welcomed it, the EU relationship with Russia retains high policy interest for both partners. But it is not at the expense of principles, even if Russian authorities contest the enduring priority for EU diplomats “to defend human rights defenders.” However, methods have become more circumspect.

Daniel Treisman (2012) captured a similar mood and rationale in Washington:

More and more people seemed to recognize that, when it came to encouraging the deepening of democracy, patience was in order. Most now accepted that lectures did not work. Although not specifically focused on democracy at all, the kind of regularized, multidimensional contacts between states and societies that Obama seemed keen to develop were the best hope for gradually changing the culture within bureaucracies and spreading knowledge about democratic procedures and methods. Broad, non-ideological business and ideological exchanges were the most effective way of transmitting western values. Of course, such contacts worked slowly and would not necessarily prompt convergence. But they had a better chance than isolation. The promotion of democracy in a country like Russia worked best when it was not called the promotion of democracy.

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But how well has it worked at all?

At the outset of his administration in 2009, US President Obama reviewed the constriction of bilateral relations that had taken place in recent years and called for a “reset” of the US-Russia relationship, which he judged to be crucial for each country, but also for the conduct of international peace and security.

Shortly after his arrival in Moscow in 2012, US Ambassador Michael McFaul told the *Handbook* that US dual-track engagement is a theme that had been channelled by the *Handbook* itself. The US would not link country-to-country relations with Russian behaviour on human rights and democracy, holding diplomatic and military cooperation hostage. However, the US would continue to engage directly with Russian civil society, including Russian political opposition figures, on issues that “we consider important as well.”

Some critics have interpreted this balanced approach as a step backward from all-out democracy development support, but proponents argue that effective outcomes count more than declaratory rhetoric. In most ways, diplomats on the ground report that human rights monitoring in Russia is more important now than a decade ago, not less.

The apparent antipathy of President Putin to any “foreign influences” in Russia has been at the basis of the recent crackdowns on international and Russian NGOs. To ascertain whether NGOs are “abiding with Russian law that bans foreign funding of political activities” (anonymous Russian spokesman), intrusive searches were conducted in March 2013, of the offices of Human Rights Watch, Transparency International and Amnesty International. Over the last year, such non-political organizations as UNICEF, the World Wildlife Federation, the International Committee of the Red Cross, the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria, the Danish Refugee Council and Médecins sans Frontières have been forced to close the doors of their Russian support operations.

Diplomats, international NGOs and Russian civil society had, for a time after the “anti-foreign influence” laws were passed, hoped that they would be there as a form of warning, but would not be acted on with great vigour. But they *were* activated — not only against international NGOs, but against a myriad of Russian organizations across the Federation, including little (non-Orthodox) church parish organizations with modest local service activities.

A high-profile prosecution against GOLOS was founded on evidence presented that it had been supported by the US National Endowment for Democracy and the European Commission, and hence was a “foreign agent.” Of course, such outside support for effectively free and fair elections — and explicitly not in support of particular parties or candidates — is a widespread international institutional practice.

There is no question that Russia’s relations with home authorities in Western democracies suffer politically from such prosecution. In the spring of 2013, German and French Foreign Ministry officials summoned Russia’s ambassadors to reiterate the point, and EU, UK and US officials criticized Russian action in forthright terms. Chancellor Merkel of Germany made the problem of Russian crackdown explicitly

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and publicly an irritant in relations during meetings with President Putin. While French President Hollande indicated on his first meeting with President Putin that he was not there to “judge,” asserted he nonetheless had to recognize the unpleasant facts.

Do vexed relations over these issues affect the quality of activity and overall influence of democratic diplomats on the ground in Russia? The *Handbook* records how, over the last decade, the practice of democratic diplomacy had been complementing the private state-to-state sphere with a parallel public dimension of dually representing the diplomats’ “whole society to the host society, beyond traditional government-to-government communication.” This has been the core of public diplomacy as practiced increasingly by Western and other ambassadors and diplomats in Moscow over the last 25 years, in the spirit of the end of the Cold War and of glasnost itself.

Perhaps the most consciously positive and effective proponent has been US Ambassador to Russia John Beyrle (in office 2008–2012), who, in fluent Russian, projected his role as “America’s Ambassador,” whose mission was to channel American society, in a people-to-people context. He did so with astute and effective use of social networks on which he recorded a personalized live blog, and via appearances on talk radio shows and local TV.

Ambassador Beyrle’s family history had unique appeal to Russians, as his father was shot down over the USSR during World War II, and after which he apparently joined the war alongside America’s Soviet allies. The ambassador was vocationally predisposed to favour public communications, having begun his government career with the US Information Service and later, the Voice of America. Two postings to Russia followed prior to his ambassadorial tenure. Beyrle was intent not just to speak to Russians, but to make sure he was “on receive” as well, in the spirit of the first of the *Handbook*’s Golden Rules, listening, respecting and understanding.

In Moscow, several Western ambassadors told the *Handbook* that it is a vital task to convince Russians that the West is not a threat and that liberal values are not hostile to what Russians consider to be traditional values of their own.

Ambassador Beyrle has explained that his purpose was to “un-demonize the US” and overcome negative stereotyping and abundant anti-American attitudes on Russian state TV. His embassy promoted educational and cultural exchanges, and, whenever possible, showcased contemporary US dance, theatre, and hip-hop and blue grass music to convey a contemporary image of America. His message that the “US is not fated to be an adversary” seemed to resonate especially with younger people, even if extremist opinion endured and pushback from the authorities was always present.

Hardline security circles vividly object to foreign diplomats or NGOs supportively engaging Russian democrats and human rights defenders, including via declaratory public diplomacy, and have adopted “dirty tricks” techniques against individual US and European diplomats they considered too forward-leaning. Ambassador Beyrle observed, at the time, an egregious doctored-video frame-up of US diplomat

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Brendan Kyle Hatcher by Russian security services. In Ambassador Beyrle's words, Hatcher, who actively supported Russian civil society members pursuing greater religious freedom and political rights, was resented by "elements in Russia that did not want the two countries to develop closer ties."

US authorities gave Hatcher prominent support through professional awards for his creative service in Russia to support basic rights. The fact that Russian authorities never apologized for slandering him could be put down to their reluctance to accept responsibility for the activity of the secret services, or it could signify that it had the unofficial sanction of the leadership itself. It was not an isolated incident; the FSB has for several years been breaking into the private homes of Western diplomats as part of an antique mindset aimed at psychological destabilization.

A visible campaign of intimidation was pursued intensively against UK Ambassador Brenton (in office 2004–2008). In 2006, he attended an inaugural meeting in the margin of a G8 summit of a coalition of dissidents and democratic opposition to the Putin regime (along with Washington-based US diplomats), as part of his outreach to civil society in a supposedly pluralistic political environment. This initiative combined with the public positions he had the duty to advance on a variety of divisive issues, such as protesting the authorities' forced closing of the British Council offices in St. Petersburg, seeking the extradition of Russian citizen Andrey Lugovoy, accused of murdering Alexander Litvinenko in London, and defending UK interests in bitter high-stake commercial disputes. The Russian security services launched the campaign of intimidation against the ambassador, largely through the Nashi nationalist youth movement, which persisted to harass and threaten him and his family throughout the remainder of his posting. On the eve of his departure from Moscow, the ambassador told reporter Will Stewart (2008) that "the British Embassy in Moscow has come under a greater barrage of bugging and espionage from the Russian secret service than at any time since the end of the Cold War."

The hostility in some circles to current US Ambassador Michael McFaul's regular blogging, outreach and public profile has also been vibrant, though staying short of attempted physical intimidation of the kind inflicted on Ambassador Brenton. The material on Ambassador McFaul's blog has concerned the substance of US-Russia relations in traditional areas of cooperation and also newer topics such as innovation (where Russia lags).

On his blog, the ambassador has noted he is "struck by misunderstandings and stereotypes in commentary....Providing more accurate information to the Russian people about the United States quickly emerged as a priority for me" (McFaul, 2012).

As a former civil society democracy activist himself and a long-time associate of many Russian democrats and human rights defenders, through his time with the Carnegie Moscow Center, McFaul also persisted without hesitation of principle in legitimate outreach and contact with civil society, in the spirit of solidarity. In his blog, Ambassador McFaul noted, among many other substantive topics in the Russia-US relationship, the US "concern about a package of new Russian laws that

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may constrain civil society and freedoms of assembly, association, and speech” (ibid.).

Diplomats on the ground take care to phrase support for civil society in ways that cannot be construed as interference in Russia’s internal political process, although contact for information’s sake with the full range of political participants remains a normal activity.

Russian political actors and NGOs have adapted to the legal need to function within the prohibition in Russia against foreign funding. Russian opposition leader Boris Nemtsov made it clear that Russian democrats don’t want that form of help. The US and other Western democracies indeed ceased funding political parties or movements years ago.

Outreach across Russia has become routine for democratic embassies, though in recent years it has had to acknowledge the dangers from Russian authorities requiring local organizations to register as a “foreign agent” if they engage in “political activity” with foreign support. However, hostile Russian rules keep deepening, perhaps because zealous officials compete for Kremlin favour in seeking to punish alleged offenders.

While definitions remain to be tested in Russian courts, the cloud of threat can become an inhibitor of contact. As an example of the darkening atmosphere for democratic public diplomacy, the Kostroma Center for the Defense of Public Initiatives was threatened by prosecutors with debilitating fines for participating in a February 2013 round table with a representative from the US Embassy on Russia-US relations, characterized by the embassy as “normal public diplomacy.” In effect, the Russians are trying to confine public diplomacy to cultural and other affairs of no political or advocacy significance. It is an approach that EU diplomats view with distaste. EU, Canadian, Australian and other human rights diplomats continue to make field trips to Russia’s regions to meet with civil society representatives who welcome the contacts.

The hostility to support for the strengthening of civil society from governments or civil society outside Russia extends increasingly even to non-political capacity-building programs that are part of foreign study. In a possibly definitive assault of free political challenge, the popular anti-corruption blogger and opposition figure Alexei Navalny has been charged/framed with fraudulent financial dealings from several years ago in an effort to remove him from the political scene. The spokesman for the federal investigative committee pursuing the charges (despite their earlier dismissal as groundless by local legal jurisdictions), Vladimir Markin, suggested “that Mr. Navalny had been trained in the West to topple Mr. Putin’s government, referring acidly to the semester he spent at Yale University’s World Fellows Program, a leadership training program for midcareer professionals” (Barry, 2013a). That such an anodyne exercise in positive exchange activity is now the object of official calumny is an indication of the extent of the problem going forward.

Regardless of the efforts to intimidate and constrain them, diplomats from democratic embassies continue to invoke the legitimacy of demonstrating support

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for Russian civil society members, social advocates and the diminishing presence of free media. They attend, when it is appropriate, the trials of human rights defenders and researchers being prosecuted or pursued in the courts, often in “show trials” produced to provide discouraging examples to dissenters.

WAYS THAT DIPLOMATS ARE MAKING A DIFFERENCE

The Golden Rules

Listening, Respecting and Understanding

There is ample evidence that outside democracies and observers got the politics and realities of Russia wrong in the early 1990s, but diplomats on the ground in those years could see the social impacts and erosion of shock therapy and made every effort to channel the information to policy makers, who had difficulty confronting a set of problems that was in many respects unprecedented in both scale and complexity.

That being said, awareness in capitals of the negative psychological impact of changes on Russians began to develop. Strobe Talbott recalls Finnish diplomat (and later President) Maati Ahtisaari advising others not to “crowd the Russians. Don’t make them feel punished or on probation.”

Obviously, in recent years, diplomatic reporting from Moscow has constituted essential input to home authorities preparing responses to events. Embassies have the best view on which responses are most likely to be effective and which responses are apt to be counterproductive. As the Putin administration cracks down on civil society and on freedoms generally, responses range from soft power choices to harder measures, such as targeted sanctions or visa bans on individuals. Advice from diplomats on the ground has been critical in shaping policy responses in Brussels and other capitals.

Diplomats have learned to respect the need of Russian civil society to keep a distance from outsiders. Outside support to any civil society group with an advocacy mandate is tempered by an awareness of their vulnerability to retaliation from Russian authorities, and their depiction as “foreign stooges.” US Ambassador McFaul has underlined the necessity of “taking clues from those that you’re seeking to help.” Embassy personnel and civil society representatives from outside have learned to count on and respect the reading on risk issues of Russian partners.

There is, however, no shortage of initiatives and events to engage Russian NGOs and civil society. Advocacy groups do welcome evidence of obviously shared values with outside democracies and especially with civil society outside, though diplomats report a tendency to downplay “democracy” as a central theme of Russian advocacy NGOs.

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Visiting delegations of European, US, Canadian and other Western officials and parliamentarians meet with civil society representatives on official visits as a matter of course. Annual human rights consultations between the EU and Russian authorities (which the Russians do not agree can take place in Russia) are methodically preceded by EU consultations with Russian civil society itself.

Direct contacts as a matter of routine are essential, a welcome indication of solidarity, and enable an accurate and sensitive appreciation of the circumstances in which Russian activists and advocates work, in the spirit of Carne Ross' "listen/ask/encounter" modus operandi for diplomats in the field.

The US Embassy and the EU delegation and others regularly convene conferences and round tables with the participation of Russian NGOs, to which the Ministry of Foreign Affairs is also invited. When Canadian diplomats meet in workshop formats with civil society in the field, they always invite local authorities on the grounds that there should be "nothing to hide" — in their words, "we ask the same questions if they are present or not."

Conference and workshop programming strives to reach the provinces as well as audiences in Moscow and St. Petersburg. In regular field trips to the regions to meet local NGOs and civil society representatives, EU human rights diplomats incorporate the spirit of the advice offered to the *Handbook* by a Chilean diplomat in Moscow, that outsiders should always be conscious in these contacts to practice "sharing, not showing off." Presenters from outside often find they have much in common with civil society discussants. For example:

- The Director of Programs for community immigrant integration services in Ottawa, Canada, attending an academic conference in Kazan on tolerance and accommodating diversity, found there was much common ground in his welcome additional encounters with local schoolchildren and NGOs.
- On International Defence Against Homophobia Day on May 17, 2012, the US Embassy hosted a round table that Russian civil society and Russian authorities both actively contributed to, a rare feat.
- The Moscow office of the UNHCR organized a special workshop featuring the acting Chief Commissioner of the Canadian Human Rights Commission on effective interrelationships in a federal system among federal and provincial human rights authorities and with the UN system.

Of course, EU human rights counsellors meet on a regular basis to compare notes and also to channel policy advice on how the EU and member states should react to developments in Russia, such as over the recent crackdowns on NGOs. Human rights officers of like-minded embassies exchange information and notes. Burden-sharing for the coverage of events such as Khodorkovsky's trial is coordinated among concerned embassies. There is awareness that the US and EU representations are "semi-demonized" by Russian security authorities, making it more desirable for others to step up support activity when possible.

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On a country-to-country level, the history over 25 years of encouraging effective sharing of common instruments of governance within multilateral organizations has been driven by a goal of integrating Russia into commonly agreed standards, with mixed effectiveness. Such multilateral institution-sharing often comes with a requirement for human rights monitoring by embassies underscoring the importance of accurate reporting on governance conditions in Russia, which in turn enhances the value of informal sharing among democratic embassies and international NGOs of respective perceptions and experience.

Since the Charter of Paris in November 1990, the USSR (briefly), and then the Russian Federation became engaged in the OSCE, the Council of Europe (especially its Parliamentary Assembly) and the G8, built an institutionalized relationship with NATO and eventually gained membership in the WTO. However, these memberships were, from the Russian perspective, framed on the basis of shared interests and not explicitly by shared values.

The distinction took on particular significance over the deteriorating human rights situation in Russia, especially over military conduct in Chechnya. Institutional sharing was weakened in consequence: Russian voting rights in the Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly have been suspended twice. The European Court of Justice in Strasbourg receives petitions from Russian citizens: the current backlog is over 70,000 applications for hearing.

A major activity in cooperative sharing has, of course, been the history of election observation, through the ODIHR mechanisms. Embassy personnel are on the front lines of election observation, but of course support only a transparent, “free and fair” process, not specific candidates or parties. The progressively critical findings of European institutions about the integrity of the Russian electoral process has caused hostility in Kremlin circles, which was extended to Russian election watchdog GOLOS, deepening international misgivings.

Truth in Communications

Once, of course, the USSR was a closed information bubble, but outside broadcasters such as the Voice of America and the BBC World Service reached millions of clandestine listeners. Despite the glasnost era explosion in free thought in the late 1980s, open media in Russia has become constrained and limited. Russia ranks 142 of 179 in the Press Freedom Index of Reporters Without Borders, though a few excellent independent newspaper and local radio services remain. While largely state-controlled TV is by far the dominant news provider, as elsewhere, younger people tend to stay current via the Internet.

Consequently, most embassies have built social media sites to provide factual information. Custom varies: some embassies scrupulously avoid any material beyond commercial and consular information spiced with lifestyle and literary references; others try to reflect some of the concerns at home about developments in Russia, while at the same time attempting to demystify the local notion that somehow, Western liberalism is intrinsically pitted against traditional Russian values.

Working with the Government: Ceding Priority to Working with Civil Society

Over time, sustained investment in substantive relationships with the Russian government recognizes that, on issues of international peace and security as well as in trade, economic and especially energy areas, Russian cooperation is highly desirable. The NATO-Russian Council established in 2002 prompted a number of cooperative projects in counter-terrorism, a topic that remains active again after the Boston terror bombings in April 2013 by two brothers from the North Caucasus. Extended consultations between the US and the Russian Federation are proceeding on the historically privileged bilateral topic of nuclear weapons build-down, and missile defence.

Several diplomats in Moscow confided the belief that the effectiveness of European democracy promotion in Russia fell short of possibly overoptimistic expectations because political considerations overrode candour in communication. Diplomats ventured the opinion that Russian authorities “gamed” the willingness of the EU to cooperate on the range of substantive interests and went through all the motions of process on human rights without making changes in behaviour or substance.

In recent years, state-to-state democracy development support and even cooperation in areas such as health services has pretty much ebbed. Russian authorities have proclaimed their belief that Russia is “past” such a need. This was cited as the reason for the abrupt termination of USAID program support in 2012, even though the bulk of USAID projects in Russia aimed in partnership to bolster a Russian state capacity for health services, which is manifestly inadequate. Civil society-to-civil society cooperation picks up some of the slack.

European support activities, which have been publicly financed but executed via civil society partnerships, have extended in recent years to a wide diversity of capacity-building and modernization endeavours, including:

- integration of refugees;
- the rights of children;
- the rights of the disabled;
- environmental rights;
- countering legislation against gays;
- creating an independent ombudsman for transparency in government;
- seniors’ centres;
- independent journalism; and
- GOLOS and independent election observation.

A major emphasis has been on the justice system, with specific programs devoted to juvenile justice. The Moscow Helsinki Group and specifically Lyudmila Alexnyeva have been pressing reform of the justice system for years and Europeans

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have lent support for the improvement in access to justice, efficiency, (free) legal aid, mediation and the appeal system.

The question is whether even such obviously non-political topics are exempt from Russian suspicions of and hostility to Western capacity-building assistance of any kind. For example, a Swedish program for training judges was terminated when the Russian State Duma passed a law forbidding the instruction or training of Russian judges by foreigners.

Dialoguing with Russian authorities on human rights issues has been an obligatory part of the agenda, though again, it is noteworthy that Russia never consented to bilateral human rights “dialogues” taking place in Russian territory or to including participants from the Interior Ministry.

The general consensus on the part of democratic partners of Russia is that dialoguing with Russian institutions should not be at the expense of connections to Russian civil society. US President Obama, for example, followed other leaders over the years from US President Clinton to UK Prime Minister Blair, who made sure their summit meetings in Russia included parallel encounters with Russian civil society, university encounters and a round table with business leaders.

Dialoguing among think tanks and Russian non-official authorities such as ex-ministers Kudrin and German Gref, or specialists in security such as Alexei Arbatov continues, with embassies in Moscow being part of the conversations. The Russian state itself has instituted several dialogue channels, such as the Valdai group which every year engages President Putin in a discussion forum with Western commentators, journalists and scholars. An unusual forum is the exclusive council formed by former Russian and American bilateral ambassadors, which has been given top access to Russian officials at its annual meetings.

Dmitri V. Trenin (2013) urges Europeans to “approach the Russians on their own terms, but they should not always expect the Russians always to conform. Unlike the EU approach toward Turkey and Ukraine (which have harbored wishes for a closer institutional relationship with the EU), the issue should not be what the Europeans want Russia to be or to become, but what they want or need from Russia.” That includes emphatically the widening of democratic space in Russia.

Of course, demarching Russian authorities is part of the diplomatic routine. A typical intervention has been the Canadian ambassador’s demarches to Russian authorities to take vivid exception to homophobic and anti-LGBT legislation adopted by the St. Petersburg local government. Apart from protesting the constraints imposed by Russian laws on “foreign agents,” there are the usual questions of regional and international security issues.

A constant preoccupation is the extent of corruption in Russia, a phenomenon emphasized by ex-President Medvedev himself. Russia is ranked 133 out of 176 countries on Transparency International’s Corrupt Perceptions Index. In consequence, Transparency International’s Moscow offices have been subject to forensic and other extremely intrusive searches by Russian tax authorities and prosecutors. The question is whether Russian authorities grasp how counterproductive an image this

kind of conduct radiates to foreign investors, a point the president of Transparency International is making without nuance to Russian ministers, and which Western ambassadors have been making privately to Russian leaders and ministers for 20 years. Finding the right mix of public declaratory protest and private communication to Russian officials is a constant search in Moscow — as it is in Beijing and other capitals.

Reaching Out

As outlined above, embassies and diplomats place reaching out and showcasing at the heart of public diplomacy. Not every aspect of Western society is enviable, but a multidimensional approach to diplomatic outreach platforms, which incorporates regular and non-political contacts between societies through business and educational exchanges, is proposed by several diplomats in Moscow as representing the best hope for spreading knowledge about democratic procedures and principles.

Trenin (2013) believes that in this field, the EU is especially well placed to pursue an influential relationship with Russia. He counsels the deployment by the EU of soft power to build a special relationship in such areas as trade, investment, humanitarian contacts and a “greater harmony of values, norms, and principles.” He also recommends that Europe be opened even more widely to Russian citizens.

As the Russian economic recovery has proceeded, and as Russian economic circumstances have improved, embassy financing of support activities has diminished considerably — notwithstanding the polemics of accusations by Russian authorities of NGOs for being “foreign agents.” At one time, democratic embassies in Moscow disposed of “post initiative funds,” which were deployed with considerable local impact to ease distress and to promote transition in the aftermath of the breakdown of the economy in the 1990s.

Today, direct intervention to support distressed sectors of the society is less usual. There is awareness of the need to support Russian NGOs, which are themselves working at a grassroots level. But it has increasingly been pursued by international civil society agencies partnering Russian “umbrella” NGOs which can then relay support to grassroots NGOs too small to register officially.

Embassies tend to lend financial support rather to showcase relevant topics. For example, the UNHCR Moscow office and the Information Services of the Council of Europe join with several embassies to stage an annual international film festival on human rights.

There is a growing tendency of Russian democracy activists to focus more consciously on the functioning of local municipal councils across Russia, to develop footholds in governance and among the grassroots, in part because of the belief the national political system is a closed monopoly. Outside programs exist in support. Prague University provides a purpose-built course on improving municipal transparency. Support programs for investigative reporting in Russian independent media now often emphasize the civic value of training in “covering City Hall” forms of reporting.

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Defending Democrats

Embattled NGO representatives in Russia decry the “planned destruction of the NGO sector” (cited in Elder, 2013), of a “Cold War on Russian civil society’s rights to free assembly, association, and speech” and to homophobic laws and seek moral support from democrats and human rights defenders outside.

Embassies of democratic countries continue to monitor trials of Russian activists and extend virtual support whenever possible, while retaining the basic principle that Russian developments are entirely in the hands of Russians themselves. An example has been the trial of Memorial head Oleg Petrovich Orlov, whose truth-telling NGO’s record has earned its officials beatings and, in the case of Natalia Estimirova, murder in Chechnya. Orlov had publicly placed responsibility for her killing in the hands of the President of the Chechen Republic, Ramzan Kadyrov, who proceeded to sue Orlov for slander. Western diplomats supported the defendant by their presence at his trial, not because he represented their interests, but because of solidarity with his fundamental rights and commitment to the truth. That the Court acquitted him in 2011 indicates that the Russian situation is not predetermined or completely settled.

The trial of anti-corruption activist and political opposition figure Alexei Navalny in Kirov has every appearance of being politically motivated, though President Putin stated he ordered that it be conducted “objectively.” The US and EU diplomats’ monitoring of the trial is carefully low profile, in that the defendant has been acting only according to his own beliefs, especially as Navalny has always emphasized his patriotic credentials in his political program.

The trial of GOLOS has also been observed by EU and US diplomats, again on the same principle of solidarity, along with the principle of openness that GOLOS represents and which has earned GOLOS international support in the past.

Russian authorities — unlike the Chinese — have not attempted to limit the reliance of Russians to the Internet and social media. (On average, Russian youth spend more than twice the amount of time in personal Internet sessions than their American counterparts.) But Russian security services spokesmen have expressed the belief that “Western secret services are using new technologies to create and maintain tension in societies,” making the issue of continued Internet openness extremely important.

CONCLUSIONS: KUDA IDYOT RUSSIYA? (“WHITHER RUSSIA?”)

Anatoly Sobchak’s observation in 1991 that in Russian society, tendencies to “dictatorship and democracy are living side-by-side” is a truism about the transitions of many societies from authoritarian — and in Russia’s case, totalitarian — conditions. All societies have reactionary and throwback elements that argue

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against liberalization using the inflammatory language of nationalists. There is rarely a straight line ahead for democratic progress.

In Russia today, the “reactionary elements” are in control of the Kremlin and are determined to crush the liberal-leaning coalitions of citizens who seek more political competition. An example is the rector of the prestigious New Economic School, Sergei Guriev, who fled Russia in May 2013 under pressure of warnings he would soon be arrested for having expressed understanding of the protest movement and Alexei Navalny’s anti-corruption campaign.

Russian citizens know they are vastly better off and freer than under Stalin; yet, there is still widespread disappointment that their interrupted democratic transition was fraught with difficulty. The belief endures still that Westerners let them down. At the same time, they are trying to process the seemingly contradictory evidence that their civic norms fall well short of what is normal for European societies.

The tensions in Russian society will be resolved only when Russians resolve the issues that create them. The removal of restrictions on basic and essential rights of citizens need to be addressed as part of a package of challenges including adverse demographic trends, inadequate health services, multiple issues of corruption and a dysfunctional justice system.

It is axiomatic that democracy development in Russia needs solidarity partnerships with outside civil society. A fundamental job of democratic diplomats in Russia is to engage the Russian people in order to try to demystify the relationships between Russia and outside democratic partners. Diplomats know that the impulses for change must come from within Russian civil society, not from outsiders. This is not an argument for passivity, indifference or a false *realpolitik* aimed at pleasing those who hold power today. The *Handbook’s* overall conclusion is that the most viable long-term investment for democratic diplomacy is in the relationships among peoples themselves.

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