

Chapter 7

The Russian Political System and U.S. National Interests

Celeste A. Wallander

Does it matter if Russia is a democracy? Classic great power diplomacy assumes that it should not; the experience of the Cold War suggests that it should. If it does matter, should the U.S. and its transatlantic partners nonetheless refrain from democratization strategies that may be ineffective or even counterproductive? These are questions that probably will never have a definitive answer, but they are especially important in contemporary security relations. At the same time that it is becoming clear that Russia's path to democratic development must once again be measured in decades rather than years, the complications and internal contradictions of transatlantic policies of democracy promotion have been thrown into sharp relief by the worsening situation of U.S. policy in Iraq, and Europe's energy dependence on Russia. Global security stakes in nonproliferation are being raised with diplomatic efforts to alter Iran's course towards a nuclear weapons capability, and to contain the effects of North Korea's independent nuclear weapons program. In an environment where it is tempting to downgrade democracy promotion for more traditional security strategies that focus on states' actions rather than their form of government, it is important to think through the reasons for democratization, understand why it has not been successful in Russia, and assess what an effective democracy promotion strategy would look like over the coming decades.

Why Democratization in Russia

It is easy to forget that U.S. objectives toward Russia after the break-up of the Soviet Union in December 1991 were driven more by fear of instability and system-shattering change than by ambitions for the emergence of a democratic Russia. As conflict within the Soviet Union developed in the late 1980s as a result of the failures of Gor-

bachev's half-hearted economic reforms combined with the much more substantial progress in political liberalization, the focus of U.S. policy toward the region was securing Soviet nuclear weapons, and recognizing the sovereignty of the newly independent post-Soviet states while reassuring Russia about the security of its own borders.¹

The first Bush Administration, like the Clinton Administration that followed it, did conceive of U.S. national security interests toward Russia as requiring the (peaceful) passing of the Soviet political-economic system, and of its Leninist foreign policy which assumed zero-sum conflict between socialist and capitalist systems. The West's security stake in the passing of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and the political-economic system created by Stalin and his successors, however, did not automatically imply that U.S. policy would aim at democratization of Russia. The first Bush Administration, led by classic realists, was most concerned with a stable transition in the global balance of power, and Russian commitment to arms control and security cooperation. Since the U.S. had negotiated arms control and had moved toward limited security cooperation with a liberalizing but non-democratic Soviet Union, this realist perspective did not require that Russia be a democracy for U.S. national security interests to be secured after the Soviet demise. The first Bush Administration did allocate funding for supporting political and economic transition and announced changes in U.S. trade policy to encourage transition economies in the post-Soviet space, but the real focus was on securing nuclear weapons and preventing a surge in proliferation as a result of the Soviet break-up. The signature priority and achievement of the Bush Administration's last year in office (driven primarily by Senators Sam Nunn and Richard Lugar) was the Cooperative Threat Reduction Program for securing and building down the post-Soviet nuclear arsenal.

A greater focus on democratization as security strategy toward Russia came with the new Clinton Administration. President Bill Clinton, and important figures on his foreign policy team, were Wilsonian liberals, rather than realists.² They embraced the liberal proposition that

¹ Blackwill, Robert D. and Sergei A. Karaganov, "Introduction and Conclusions," in Blackwill, Robert D. and Sergei A. Karaganov, eds., *Damage Limitation or Crisis? Russia and the Outside World* (Washington: Brassey's Inc., 1994).

² Goldgeier, James M. and Michael McFaul, *Power and Purpose: U.S. Policy toward Russia and the Cold War* (Washington: Brookings Institution Press, 2003), ch. 5.

democratic political systems have created among themselves a zone of separate peace, and a security community in which the use of force is ruled out and thus deep security cooperation the norm.³ Therefore, if countries are democracies, the potential for conflict with them is lessened, and the potential for meaningful security cooperation with them is increased: both developments would enhance American national security. This principle lies at the heart of democratization in the post-Communist world as a central component of U.S. security policy. It informed the focus on democracy promotion efforts in U.S. policy in the 1990s, at least in principle if not always in practice.

With the second Bush Administration's assumption of leadership in 2001, the democratization aspect of U.S. national security policy was initially downgraded. Condoleezza Rice, President George W. Bush's National Security Advisor (and top Russia expert) had written an article for *Foreign Affairs* in 2000 which was a clear call for a return to a realist foreign policy: that is, one that did not primarily define U.S. national security in terms of the nature of the political system of its international counterparts.⁴

Yet, it proved impossible to sustain a solely realist U.S. definition of the nature of U.S. national security interests in the case of Russia. One reason is that the American foreign policy tradition has always managed—perhaps uncomfortably, but pragmatically—a mix of power-oriented and aspirational precepts, and Bush II realists found that ideational democracy promoters inhabited Republican as well as Democratic corridors of power.⁵ By 2004, democracy promotion as a component of U.S. national security policy toward the post-Soviet space had re-emerged as a central component of the American strategy on security.

In part, this was driven by the larger context of the Bush Administration's global war on terror and justification for the war in Iraq as a necessary strategy for denying terrorist groups safe havens or fruitful

³ On the democratic peace, see Doyle, Michael, "Kant, Liberal Legacies, and Foreign Affairs," *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, 1983; on security communities, Deutsch, Karl W. (et. al.), *Political Community and the North Atlantic Area: International Organization in Light of Historical Experience*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957).

⁴ Rice, Condoleezza, "Campaign 2000: Promoting the National Interest," *Foreign Affairs*, January/February 2000.

⁵ Mead, Walter Russell, *Special Providence: American Foreign Policy and How it Changed the World*, (New York: Routledge, 2002).

recruiting grounds. However, democracy promotion in the U.S. Russia/Eurasia regional strategy has also been the result of a re-evaluation of the negative effects on non-democratic rule in Eurasia on components of national security beyond those of the democratic peace. In a January 2006 speech at Georgetown University, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, announced a new security strategy of “transformational diplomacy” premised on the view that “the fundamental character of regimes now matters more than the international distribution of power” for peace and security, and that therefore U.S. foreign policy would work “to build and sustain democratic, well-governed states that will respond to the needs of their people and conduct themselves responsibly in the international system.”⁶ Rice’s argument was clearly aimed primarily at the security threat posed by “failed states” and their potential for serving as breeding grounds and safe harbors for transnational terrorism. Yet while she did not name Russia as a case that would fall under this category, Russia’s ongoing struggle with terrorism in Chechnya and the spread of ethno-religious conflict in Russia’s North Caucasus regions had caused considerable concern in official Washington circles that while Russia as a state may not fail, its failure to effectively govern was driving extremism in vulnerable areas of Eurasia.

By 2006, then, the “democratic peace” basis for seeing democratization in Russia as in American national security interests was joined by a concern that insofar as Russia’s non-democratic trajectory would lead to human rights abuses, extremism, and economic dislocation in important regions of U.S. national security interests would be at stake. The President’s second term brought belated recognition that a non-democratic Russia is a poorly-governed, potentially unstable, and recalcitrant global player, and that successful and stable democracy in Russia is ultimately a necessary condition for security and stability throughout Eurasia, including the western former Soviet Union, the Caucasus, Central Asia, and the Far East. Geopolitical security stability in Eurasia will depend on the quality of Russia’s political system, and therefore on the prospects for stable and effective democracy. As Zbigniew Brzezinski has argued for years, Russia-as-democracy and Russia-as-empire are incompatible: Russia’s neighbors will not be

⁶ Secretary Condoleezza Rice, “Transformational Diplomacy,” speech at Georgetown University, January 18, 2006. Available at: <http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2006/59306.htm>.

secure as sovereign and independent countries as long as Russia is not reliably on the path to European-style democracy.⁷

Or to put it another way: although the U.S. might in theory be able to live without a democratic Russia, a stable and successful Russia would preclude many of the sources of security threats that U.S. policy-makers have to worry about today. Whether one is worried about geopolitical rivalry in Eurasia, conflict among nation-states with modern destructive weapons, or the host of new security threats (terrorism in the Eurasian borderlands, transnational crime, and WMD proliferation), Russian democratization would be a net positive for American national security interests.

This is far from an ideological or idealistic case for Russian democratization as a U.S. security interest. It is one that assumes that democratic states are better governed, better able to cooperate, and more capable (as well as willing) to tackle common global challenges. This strategic perspective on U.S. interests continues to co-exist uncomfortably, and therefore compete periodically, with a realist perspective that dismisses the idea that how states are governed internally affects how they behave and affect security relations internationally. Most recently, heightened concern about Russia's "wrong direction" away from democratization—expressed in both governmental and non-governmental circles⁸—has been counterbalanced by Bush Administration efforts to secure Russian cooperation on nuclear nonproliferation efforts toward Iran and North Korea, as well as U.S. and European concerns about global energy supplies and Russia's influential role as a major energy exporter.⁹ Of course, a Russian elite and society committed to democratization would mean that the United States might not have to face trade-offs or a choice in democratization strategies in the region, since such a Russia would not view such a strategy as a threat and be disinclined to cooperate as a result. Therefore, the prospects for

⁷ Brzezinski, Zbigniew, *The Grand Chessboard: American Primacy and its Geostrategic Imperatives*, (New York: Basic Books, 1997), p. 44.

⁸ For an official perspective, see remarks by Deputy Secretary of State David Kramer, 25 July 2006. Available at <http://usinfo.state.gov/xarchives/display.html?p=washfile-english&y=2006&m=July&x=200607241531441cjsamoht0.1661646>. For the non-official expert community's view, see *Russia's Wrong Direction: What the United States Can and Should Do*, Independent Task Force Report Number 57 (New York: Council on Foreign Relations, 2006).

⁹ Wallander, Celeste A., "Suspended Animation: the U.S. and Russia after the G-8," *Current History*, (October 2006), pp. 315-320.

U.S. strategy depend not only on the logical basis for the strategy itself, but on the conditions in Russia for its realization.

Democratization and De-Democratization in Russia, 1988-2006

One must recognize that the impetus for political liberalization in the Soviet Union came from within the country in the waning years of the Cold War, as a result of the strategic calculations of certain individuals in the Soviet elite, led by Mikhail Gorbachev. It is also instructive to keep in mind that the liberalization that Gorbachev launched in the last years of the Soviet Union arose from his assessment that the economic reforms necessary to sustain and renew Soviet power would require greater political competition and competing sources of information and ideas within the Soviet system, as well as great integration with the Western-defined global economic system.

So the reformist Gorbachev objective was ultimately national power and well-being, the immediate objective was economic reform, and political liberalization was an instrument toward those objectives. Certain political elites in the Soviet Union were willing to experiment with their degree of state control because they saw that the system was failing to sustain the Soviet Union's international power, and that the political system was an obstacle to reform required to correct that crisis. Glasnost and democratization were meant to shake-up a rigid system that by 1987 was blocking Gorbachev's efforts at economic reform.¹⁰

Having broken the Communist Party's monopoly on information and debate, and having introduced the principle of competitive elections for the Congress of People's Deputies in 1989, the Gorbachev political liberalization evolved from an instrument of a still-authoritarian leadership to a force that began to have unanticipated effects. New social groups, and activists who—unlike the Gorbachev leadership—had as their goal not reforming the Soviet system to save it, but overthrowing it (through democratic means), were able to challenge the Communist Party and the state. Democratic movements were

¹⁰This section draws heavily on the comprehensive account of Russian democratization in McFaul, Michael, *Russia's Unfinished Revolution: Political Change from Gorbachev to Putin* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001).

formed, and blocks of democratic-oriented elected deputies worked to organize in the Parliament. Boris Yeltsin won the Russian Federal Republic Presidency in June 1991 against old guard candidates, and the locus of political initiative and opposition shifted to the 15 republics of the Soviet Union. Gorbachev's most immediate crisis became holding the Soviet Union together, and in some manner other than the use of force (as he had in January 1991). To deal with the crisis, he broke with hardliners and opened negotiations with republic leaders and democrats for a renegotiation of the Soviet Union treaty. The result was the August 1991 failed attempt by elements of the old Soviet leadership to overthrow Gorbachev by force and preserve (or re-impose) the Soviet political system by force.

When the Soviet Union was declared dissolved and thus the Russian Federation became a sovereign and independent state on December 8, 1991, dictatorship was gone, but democracy did not replace it. Russia lacked political parties, independent media, an active civil society, and legal institutions for managing the boundaries between and relationship of political and economic power. Russian political actors were polarized, fragmented, and radicalized.

Most problematic of all, Russia's political system and leaders would have to simultaneously cope with three fundamental issues that required resolution in order for stable democracy to be established in Russia: the definition and security of the nation-state, the functioning of the economy, and institutions for managing political competition that were legitimate and generally recognized by all political actors. Russia's borders and its external security were in question: Russian citizens and military were deployed in its newly independent neighbors, centuries of links with the outside world were now in the hands of neighbors which often viewed Russia as a security threat, and while the United States declared cooperation in the security relationship, it now held considerable superiority over the remnants of Soviet power held by Russia.

On the economic front, severe contraction arising from the dislocation of an integrated economy into 15 countries was exacerbated by the immediate freeing of prices on January 1, 1992. Scarcity of goods and iconic Soviet-era lines outside shops disappeared, but inflation began to erase the value of Russians' wages, which were often not paid in any event as the government struggled to develop its new fiscal and

macroeconomic system. Russia's economic reformers believed they needed to change certain fundamentals quickly while Yeltsin remained popular in order to prevent the possibility of a return to a command economy: they were likely right, but the suddenness and thoroughness of the change created great social costs and sacrificed the opportunity for building political support for economic reform.¹¹

As a result, in 1992, the main political development in Russia became the emergence of substantial political opposition to the economic reform program, which became known as "shock therapy." Furthermore, because the Yeltsin reformers had followed the advice of many Western experts, the economic dislocation became associated with Western policy.¹² Political opposition and chaos convinced Yeltsin to hold off on disbanding the old Soviet-era Supreme Soviet, which simply preserved and intensified the growth of political opposition. By the middle of 1992, opposition to the economic reforms had caused Yeltsin to endorse a halt on the full menu of radical change, leaving Russia with many of the costs but few of the benefits of radical reform. Industrial subsidies were sustained, government spending was not limited, and inflation surged. By late 1992, the economic reform team was gone, and Russia's new Prime Minister was Viktor Chernomyrdin.

Instead of resulting in a workable compromise to find moderate middle ground, these changes preserved and intensified the confrontation over economic reform policy, and grew into a confrontation over political authority between Russian President Yeltsin and the Supreme Soviet, where conservative forces were well-represented. Yeltsin won a referendum in April 1993 endorsing his leadership, and used it to advance a new constitution for October 1993. That brought the confrontation to a head, and in September 1993 Yeltsin unilaterally dissolved the Parliament, unconstitutionally. The Parliament refused to disband and leave the Parliament building, and after being isolated by Yeltsin's orders, used force to seize a television station and government buildings. Yeltsin ordered the use of force against the Parliament, and

¹¹ On the argument for the need for a sharp and drastic break with the Soviet economic past, see Boycko, Maxim, and Andrei Schleifer, and Robert Vishny, *Privatizing Russia*, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1995).

¹² For a passionate critic of western advisors as the cause of Russia's economic contraction, see Wedel, Janine R., *Collision and Collusion: The Strange Case of Western Aid to Eastern Europe, 1989-1998*, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998).

won. Russia's leading democrat had acted unconstitutionally, and then used military force in a confrontation with opponents to retain power. This was not democratization, and the Russian public began to view the term "democracy" negatively for its political and economic effects.

With his political opponents dispersed or in prison, Yeltsin was able to achieve ratification of a new constitution in December 1993 that enhanced the power of the president and created a new bicameral legislature. Despite the sad showing of October 1993, progress toward a democracy was still very possible in the mid-1990s. Several national political parties developed, although they were often weak and unevenly distributed at the regional level and of uneven quality at the national level,¹³ there were diverse media outlets that reported critically on competing political figures and the government, regional governments and legislatures were sources of competition and constraint on central authority, and elections were not systematically fraudulent or manipulated.

The problem of Russian democratization in the 1990s did not so much lie directly in the political system, but rather in the rise of the "oligarchs" and in Russia's external security environment. While Russia had a constitution, elections, and a potentially functioning federal system, the appearance of a handful of businessmen who were able to use position and insider knowledge to acquire large chunks of the residual Soviet economy made the nascent democratic features of the Russian political system essentially irrelevant to the functioning of the state.¹⁴ Their influence was heightened by the continuing incompetence of Russian macroeconomic policy, which drove inflation and continued the long slide in economic well-being. The Yeltsin government became dependent on loans from both the international community in the form of IMF credits through a special arrangement designed to prop up the Yeltsin leadership, and on loans from Russian banks and oligarchs. As the economy weakened and Russia's living standards continued their post-Soviet decline, Yeltsin's popularity sunk to the single digits, with a presidential election looming in 1996.

¹³ Hale, Henry E., *Why Not Political Parties in Russia? Democracy, Federalism, and the State*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

¹⁴ On the rise of these men, see Solnick, Steven, *Stealing the State; Control and Collapse in Soviet Institutions*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999); Hoffman, David E., *The Oligarchs: Wealth and Power in the New Russia*, (New York: Public Affairs, 2002).

At the same time that they felt insecure in their daily economic lives at home, Russians also had reason to fear that their external security environment had worsened as a result of the passing of the Soviet Union and successive leadership's experiments in democratization and cooperation with the West. In the U.S. and Europe, NATO enlargement is viewed as a democracy-promotion policy, and for the alliance's new members, it has been. But with respect to Russia, NATO enlargement was viewed as a violation of the negotiated end to the Cold War, and a strategy aimed against Russia. Russian democratic figures were also among the late-Soviet "new thinkers" who had argued for security cooperation with the United States: Their argument for security cooperation and democratization was undermined by NATO enlargement in the mid-1990s, and by NATO's unilateral use of force against Serbia (a Slavic country) in 1999.¹⁵

In terms of the democracy promotion aspect of U.S. strategy toward Russia, therefore, the 1990s was the worst of both worlds. U.S. policy in both rhetoric and in material support propped up the Yeltsin government (and notably the person of Boris Yeltsin himself) while that government's irresponsible policies were eroding the Russian public's living standards in the name of democracy and reform. A new system of corrupt political and economic rule was being created under the banner of democracy, but in fact political power was wielded by a small handful of increasingly wealthy and unaccountable businessmen who were busy producing little and instead acquiring assets, usually selling off what was profitable and moving the profits abroad. Even worse, the 1996 presidential elections contributed to the further development of this corrupt political economic system. In exchange for loans to keep the state afloat and convince Russians to vote for his presidency, Yeltsin agreed to the "loans for shares" deal that resulted in a second round of highly profitable but thoroughly corrupt privatization of Russian state-owned firms. The Clinton Administration had staked its democratization strategy on strengthening President Yeltsin in the hope that a strong President Yeltsin would effectively hold off retrograde conservative forces in Russian politics.¹⁶ The price of doing so, however, was to support an increasingly undemocratic and corrupt

¹⁵ See Wallander, Celeste A., "Lost and Found: Gorbachev's New Thinking," *The Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 25, no. 1 (Winter 2001), pp. 117-129.

¹⁶ On the strategy, see Talbott, Strobe, *The Russia Hand: A Memoir of Presidential Diplomacy*, (New York: Random House, 2002).

Yeltsin, and to be associated with a figure that Russian citizens viewed with contempt by the end of his presidency.

When the government's macroeconomic incompetence and unaccountability of the true oligarchic power structure resulted in the 1998 default, devaluation, and financial crash, the Russian public had come to view "democracy" not as a desirable objective, but as at best a smoke-screen for domestic injustice and greed, and as at worst a Western policy meant to undermine and possibly fragment the Russian population.

When in the summer of 1999 Russia suffered a series of bombings, and the assault on a neighboring region by Chechen terrorists who had enjoyed safe haven under a Yeltsin-government brokered cease-fire, it was the last straw. Their external security situation was precarious, their living standards had plummeted while a few corrupt insiders became ostentatiously wealthy and powerful, and by late 1999 Russians could not even believe themselves to be secure in their own apartments. All this in the interests of "democracy," an objective which also had played no small role in the break-up of the Soviet Union.

This is not to minimize the cynical and deliberate assault launched on the few elements of pluralism and contestation in the Russian political system by the new Putin leadership beginning in 2000. But it is to explain that for Russians, "democracy promotion" means loss of power and status, economic depression, a weakened and ineffective state, enormous debt, vulnerability both externally and domestically, and possible malign intent on the part of the West. When Putin and his associates began to eliminate the elements of pluralism and competition that had survived the 1990s by eliminating independent national media, they were viewed with sympathy and enjoyed overwhelming support by a Russian public inclined to agree that democracy brought only weakness and poverty. Subsequent actions by the Putin leadership to eliminate competition and strengthen the Kremlin's hold on power have all been justified in terms that implicitly or even explicitly criticize the role of a questionable policy of democratization in harming Russians and Russia.

The Russian political system in 1999 was not a democracy, but it was pluralistic. Developments since then have seen the consolidation of a patrimonial authoritarian political system. Individual and human

rights are not secure, the state owns the important outlets of national media, oligarchs who are not politically subservient to the Kremlin have had their assets taken or been pressured to sell them to compliant businessmen, regional governors and governments have been placed under direct president control or indirect influence, both houses of parliament are run by the Kremlin through appointment or control of the Kremlin's party (United Russia), and national competitive political parties have been effectively eliminated.¹⁷ What passes for the periodic public exercise of voting should be called "selections" rather than "elections" in Russia, because the process is thoroughly managed by the Kremlin in order to ensure that the outcome will be one in which meaningful competition or contestation cannot emerge.

The Putin leadership now unabashedly dismisses "democracy promotion" as at best a naïve strategy that has done Russia a great deal of harm because it ignores Russia's important historic and contemporary realities, and at worst a hostile strategy aimed at weakening and containing the country. The current Putin leadership is directly threatened by democracy promotion, since it retains its hold on power and control over Russia's considerable assets through non-democratic means. This is a broader problem for the Russian leadership, than just that of Russia: U.S. democracy promotion in Russia and Eurasia is seen in terms of geopolitical containment and the weakening of Russia.¹⁸ The Russian political elite's obsession with this threat was illustrated by new reports of a classified study for the Russian Duma on American plans to launch a "color revolution" in Russia akin to those in Georgia and Ukraine.¹⁹

It is particularly interesting, however, that while Russia is not a democracy, its leaders and society are not ready to accept that fact. Instead, the Kremlin has tried to advance the argument that the Russian political system is a democracy of a different sort: the term first advanced was "managed" democracy, and more recently "sovereign"

¹⁷ McFaul, Michael, and Nikolai Petro, and Andrei, Ryabov, "Postscript: The 2003 Parliamentary Elections and the Future of Russian Democracy," pp. 292-298 in McFaul, Michael, and Nikolai Petro, and Andrei Ryabov, eds., *Between Dictatorship and Democracy: Russian Post-Communist Political Reform*, (Washington DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2004).

¹⁸ Wallander, Celeste A., "Suspended Animation: the U.S. and Russia after the G-8," *Current History*, October 2006, pp. 315-320.

¹⁹ See "Experts Warn of U.S. Subversion Efforts," *The Moscow Times*, September 22, 2006, p. 3.

democracy. Since neither variant involves the fundamental attributes of democracy (free media, competitive political parties, free and fair elections, and institutional constraints to keep elected officials accountable), adding an adjective should not mislead anyone into the conceptual sleight of mind the Kremlin theorists seem to be aiming for. However, it is important to understand that Russian leaders have felt the need to make the case that Russia is developing a form of democracy, simply one that is not defined, imposed, or manipulated by the West (and particularly the United States). Russian democracy is “sovereign” because it takes whatever form Russians want, without being dictated to by foreign powers. Therefore, Western policies of democracy promotion are not merely unwelcome: they are viewed as instruments of anti-Russian intentions.

Nevertheless, the attempt to claim the mantle of “sovereign” democracy is interesting, and instructive. Despite the bad reputation that democracy has in today’s Russia as the cause of the Soviet break-up and Russia’s decline in the 1990s, the term still seems to have a normative weight and attraction. Russians and their leaders do not like being told how to run their political system, but they also do not like being told that their political system is not a democracy. If they do not seem to value the substance of democracy, why would this be?

I would suggest it is because they recognize that to be modern, integrated, European, and powerful in the 21st Century—in short a contemporary great power—Russia needs the legitimacy and moral authority of democracy. Autocracy is a throwback to tsarist times, and authoritarianism to the late Soviet period. For all its retrograde actions, the Putin leadership’s political system should not be viewed as a throwback: it is a new configuration of institutions meant to make Russia powerful, with a strong state controlling the terms and modes of that power.²⁰

This suggests that the term “democracy” still has elements of a normative meaning to Russia’s leaders and citizens. Its leaders may not welcome an effective democratic system, because that would complicate and possibly break their hold on power. And Russian citizens may have disdain for what “democratization” did to their living standards

²⁰ For an analysis on this new political system and its implications for Russian foreign policy, see Wallander, Celeste A., “Russian Transimperialism and its Implications,” *The Washington Quarterly*, Spring 2007.

and security during the 1990s. Yet, there is an attraction to democracy, even in weary and cynical Russia, and that holds out hope for a renewed transatlantic strategy for partnership and integration with the goal of a secure, prosperous, democratic Russia.

Lessons and Implications

For a renewed strategy to have a chance for success, the transatlantic community needs to be hard-headed and self-critical about the lessons of the past 15 years. Blaming Russian culture, or Putin, or high (or low) oil prices is not a fruitful basis for evaluation and a renewed strategy. Understanding what makes democracy work, and why that was missing in Russia, is a more realistic approach. The question of the sources of successful democratization is an enormous one, and the evidence and debate of experts goes far beyond what this paper can encompass. However, a few lessons are clear, and should be kept in mind as we begin to think about the next decade of Russia policy.

Lessons of the Period of Liberalization, 1988-1991: The incentives for liberalization, economic change, and efforts for global integration came from within, and were embraced by important (and powerful) leaders in the Soviet system. Certainly, Western policy played a role in shaping the incentives and attractiveness of the Western political and economic system, and the Western strategy of patient containment ultimately forced the internal contradictions and weaknesses of the Soviet system to weaken it from within. Nonetheless, the selection by the Politburo and the elite support that launched Gorbachev's career and policies were internal to the Soviet system. Certainly, Gorbachev faced many opponents, and critics warned that he would weaken the Soviet Union. But Gorbachev's policies were his own, and depended primarily on his ability to create support and allies within the Soviet system. He sought a supportive international environment, of course, and pursued arms control and an end to East-West confrontation in order to justify his internal reforms and to reduce the burdens of high defense spending in order to free resources for reform. Nonetheless, his support, the strategies his coalition launched, and the potential benefits to stakeholders in the reformist leadership were primarily home-grown. Gorbachev and his reformers were products of the Soviet Union: they had the legitimacy and experience to make politics in their country work. Certainly, in the end they failed, but we cannot

overlook how much they achieved until the final year or two when opposition consolidated and launched an active counter-strategy. The lesson of late Soviet liberalization and its success in eroding the hold of the Stalinist system is that legitimate domestic leadership is essential to successful political reform.

Lessons of the Period of Resilient Old Institutions, 1991-1993: The Soviet Union, its laws, constitution, and eventually its Communist Party were formally disbanded in the exciting, hopeful aftermath of the Cold War. However, formal rules are not necessarily the source of power, and persistent practices, relationships, and influential networks meant that old Soviet institutions were more important and powerful than the formal appearance of the new Russian state seemed to signify. Securing the loyalty of the residual Soviet military required half-hearted reform and maintenance of the Soviet military cultural and professional assumptions about the West and the security problems it posed, for example. Privatization meant in principle that new market forces and a new generation of market-savvy entrepreneurs would become Russia's business realities, but in fact access, power, and connections in Russia's Soviet-rooted bureaucracy proved much more important for access to wealth and property than knowledge of liberal economic theory or Western business practices. Russian citizens valued political change, but were not prepared for the collapse of state and social services, along with rapid decline in the economy: their elected representatives turned out to be effective forces of a conservative backlash against Western liberalization in those early years. And the Soviet/Russian security and intelligence services, we now know, were only formally downgraded, fragmented, and disbanded. Personal and professional relationships and cultures were sustained, and the elite cohort that looked like it had lost everything it had been trained for with the end of the Cold War was sustained and nurtured through connections and access in the 1990s, ready to re-emerge with Putin's leadership in 2000. So the second lesson is that old political institutions and practices do not disappear with formal change, and can be more powerful and resilient than the visible formal trappings of a reformed political system.

Lessons of the Period of Personalized Politics, 1993-1999: Successful democratization is not the result of good leaders or a president with reformist views. It is rooted in institutions, processes, and the system

of checks and balances, constraint and accountability, legitimacy and respect for liberal values. Western efforts to prop up Yeltsin might, perhaps, have served Russian democratization if the effects of reinforcing that individual were to enable him to build those fundamental institutions of liberal democracy. However, propping him up by bending or breaking the standards on IMF credits and G7/G8 membership, demanding (or at least strongly advising) policies for which he had little domestic support or legitimacy, excusing his use of force against a legitimate legislature, rationalizing aggressive force against Russian citizens in Chechnya, and turning a blind eye to the corruption and rapacious greed of his government all served to weaken support for political liberalization and to waste precious time for reinforcing institutions of rule of law and accountability necessary in democracy. In other words, in its zeal to support the great man in history who was the only guarantee (so it was argued) that Russia would stay on a democratic path, the transatlantic community helped to make it possible for Boris Yeltsin to retain power, but by undermining nascent democratic institutions and processes. The deep irony of the lesson of Russia's period of failed democratic institution-building in the 1990s is that Russians believe that this was their experience with Western democracy promotion, when in fact U.S. and European policies were helping the Yeltsin regime disregard the basic political institutions which should be at the core of a strategy of democratization.

Lessons of the Period of Popular Elections, 1999-2006: Elections are among the least important and most misleading components of a strategy of democracy promotion. Ultimately, of course, free and fair elections are the *most* important component of a successful strategy of democracy promotion. However, elections are not only meaningless, they are misleading, and potentially a tool of anti-democratization, if they are not free and fair. The function of elections in a democracy is to hold government leaders accountable to the citizens, but they cannot function unless citizens have a genuine choice among candidates and parties, and have independent information about the policies and performance of elected officials and candidates. Without access to meaningful information and a genuine choice among candidates, elections may be not only meaningless, but counterproductive for democratization. In Russia, "elections" have been held under the Putin leadership for some six years, allowing the government to claim that it is a

democracy of sorts, and that it is supported by Russian citizens. Far from advancing democratization, these quasi-elections have thus helped to legitimate the consolidation of an authoritarian Russian political system. Election monitoring and related programs for parallel vote tabulation to assess whether elections are free and fair are an essential component of a policy of democracy promotion, but unless they are part of a package involving the entire range of capacities and activities which make for meaningful choice and effective accountability for voters, these programs risk serving anti-democratic strategies instead.

The implications for transatlantic policy on defending the gains of democratization in the case of Russia are not surprising. First, democracy promotion is consistent with national self-interest and core security interests. Although values also motivate support for democracy in American political culture, the strategic security reasons for democratization remain as relevant in dealing with Russia today as they were when everything seemed possible with the passing of the Cold War and Soviet Union.

Second, defending the gains of democratization requires a multifaceted set of policies that include election monitoring and support, but does not begin or end there. A strategic policy of democratization toward Russia (and the other countries of the post-Soviet region) requires integrated policies that support a benign security environment, sustainable economic reform and development, resources for social support in coping with change and dislocation, and providing independent and objective information for citizens.

Third, while individuals can make a difference, institutions are more important to the long-term stable progress of liberalization and democratization. Perhaps the U.S. will at times in its security relations support corrupt dictators for reasons of national interest. However, the U.S. should never support corrupt dictators against rule of law and other institutional mechanisms that provide for constraints on political power and accountability to voters in the misguided illusion that supporting a non-democratic leader somehow supports democratization. Either that leader will retain power, and thus be non-democratic by definition, or, even if well-intentioned, he is creating the basis for authoritarian rule for the leader who will take power after him.

Finally, the transatlantic community cannot be more committed to democratization in Russia than Russians, and particularly their liberalizing and reformist leaders. Democracy has a negative, and distorted, meaning in Russia today because of the experience of the 1990s, and because of the manipulation of information by the current Russian leadership. An effective effort for democratization in Russia will have to involve better education, engagement of Russian citizens, and opportunities for Russians to interact with the transatlantic and global communities in order to begin to reverse the negative impressions and correct the misunderstandings that Russians have about their own stake in democratic governance. The key to democracy is the accountability of the government to its citizens, so it makes little sense to advocate a policy that Russia's citizens do not value themselves. A renewed strategy of democracy promotion might start with listening to Russian citizens and learning from them to understand their priorities and ideas for making their government work for them.