

Tom Bjorkman

## Russian Democracy and American Foreign Policy

The policies emerging under Russian President Vladimir Putin hold the potential for building stronger democratic institutions as well as for growing repression of political opposition. The conviction of Putin and most of the Russian elite that only a market economy and closer links with the West will provide a basis for prosperity and international stature gives the United States substantial influence over how the fluid political situation in Russia develops. America's approach to such deeply controversial issues in Russia as NATO enlargement and national missile defense should be crafted to convincingly invite Russian participation, demonstrate that U.S. support for Russia's integration into the West is more than rhetoric, and undermine anti-American elements in the elite who argue that Russia is not welcome and has nothing to gain. At the same time, the United States can take the lead in forging a united front among its European allies in convincing Putin that his government's actions against independent media and other voices of opposition are diverting Russia from the path toward integration.

Russia made dramatic progress toward a democratic order—that is, toward real elections, protections for civil liberties, and a rule of law—in the last years of the USSR and in the first years of an independent Russia under former President Boris Yeltsin. But observers inside and outside Russia agree that progress toward democracy stalled by the mid-1990s. The ratings assigned to Russia by Freedom House, a Washington-based organization that tracks the progress of democracy across the globe, have gradually eroded since then (see figure 1).

Analysts disagree on the reasons for Russia's failure to complete a transition to an effective democratic order. Some emphasize communism's grim legacy and the lack of historical experience with democratic values and behavior. Others emphasize leadership failures, especially Yeltsin's Byzantine style of rule and his failure to place a priority on building viable institutions to fill the vacuum left by the collapse of communism. But most agree on the results:

- Power remains concentrated in the executive branch and centered on informal networks and personal connections.
- Legislative and judicial institutions remain fragile.
- Protections for civil liberties are weak, and state harassment of independent journalists and civic activists is on the rise.
- Official corruption remains pervasive and movement toward a rule of law glacial.



Tom Bjorkman is a federal executive fellow in Foreign Policy Studies at the Brookings Institution until August 2001. He is an officer in the CIA's analysis directorate and the former research director of its Office of Russian and Eurasian Analysis.

The views expressed in this Policy Brief are those of the author and are not intended to reflect the position of the CIA or the U.S. government.

# How America Should

Figure 1

## Measuring Russia's Democracy

The "Annual Survey of Freedom Country Ratings" from Freedom House classifies countries and territories as "Free," "Partly Free," or "Not Free" by taking the average of their political rights and civil liberties ratings. On a scale of 1 to 7, 1 represents the most democratic. Countries ranking between 5.5 and 7 are considered "Not Free."

Year	Political Rights	Civil Liberties
1985-86	7	7
1991-92	3	3
1994-95	3	4
1998-99	4	4
2000-01	5	5

Source: Freedom House website, "Annual Survey of Freedom Country Ratings."

Western observers concerned about Russia's future view deeper democracy as the solution to Russia's problems. Public opinion polls show that the Russian public—and even more so Russian elites—continue to support democratic values by solid majorities. But in the current situation, most Russians identify as their first priority decisive action to halt the state's loss of capacity to provide essential services and to create a basis for sustained economic growth. The drop in living standards during the Yeltsin era, and the success of a small segment of the elite in exploiting Yeltsin-era reforms for their own benefit, have sharply reduced the influence of Russian liberals who argue that the best way to achieve these goals is to shrink the role of the state and move more boldly toward Western-style individual freedoms. Political forces centered in the federal security institutions—convinced that Russia's first priority is rebuilding the power of the state—have filled the vacuum. They give lip service to democracy but back policies that, in the pursuit of a more powerful state, allow the government a stronger role in managing political life and an ability to manipulate democratic institutions to limit political opposition.

President Putin has spoken repeatedly about his commitment to democracy as the only way forward for Russia. He has rhetorically supported a free press, fewer but more potent political parties, an independent judiciary, and a vibrant civil society that can exert control over the state. At the same time, he has backed policies that increase the state's ability to restrict civil liberties and has sanctioned a government that has increasingly interfered in media and non-governmental organizations that it considers too critical of Putin's policies.

## Risks and Opportunities for Democracy

For proponents of democracy in Russia, there are opportunities in the current political environment. As part of his effort to rebuild the state, President Putin and most of his

# Approach Russian Integration

## Russia's Political Spectrum: Liberals, Communists, Centrists

The right side of the political spectrum in Russia is occupied by parties and organizations that describe themselves as liberal. In line with the classical European sense of the term, they seek to shrink the role of the state and expand protections for individual liberties. Most liberal politicians support the thrust of the government's liberalizing economic program while opposing policies that increase the state's authority to manipulate independent political and societal institutions.

Communists, who generally support the president's state-centered policies on the political front but oppose his economic program, anchor the left end of the political spectrum.

Continuing skepticism among the Russian public about the communists and disillusionment with the liberals have paved the way to a dominant role for a variety of centrist parties whose only coherent ideology is support for the president. As one measure of their relative clout, liberal parties currently hold about 50 seats in the 450-seat Duma, while pro-Communist deputies hold around 130. Most of the balance is held by several centrist parties.

administration appear committed to a package of liberal reforms that would strengthen the independence of the judicial branch—a first step toward checking executive power, improving protections of individual rights, and establishing a rule of law. Some elements of draft legislation governing political parties could work to increase the role those parties play and create a basis for the loyal but vigorous opposition that Russia still lacks. Putin's support for such structural change suggests he has put a higher priority on building effective political and economic institutions than Yeltsin. Putin's backing for such liberalizing reforms has given liberals a stronger influence on policy than their modest presence in the legislature alone would suggest.

There is also a serious threat of a more resolute authoritarianism in the course that Putin has set. He has brought into the administration political forces for whom a strong state is more important than democracy. The "super-presidential" political order created under Yeltsin already gives extraordinary powers to the executive branch. Legislation under consideration would give new authority to state institutions to control political opposition. Polls suggesting strong public support for decisive leadership to solve Russia's problems could encourage the Putin administration to believe that it has a free hand to adopt more authoritarian policies.

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## Creating Stronger Political Parties

Russia's political landscape has featured a plethora of parties, most of which have suffered from limited membership, a short life, and no presence outside a handful of large cities. Legislative remedies for this legacy now under consideration illustrate the threat and the promise of policy initiatives coming from the Putin administration. Minimum national membership requirements in a draft law on parties introduced by the administration, as well as separate legislation that would mandate proportional representation in regional legislatures, could stimulate parties to put down deeper roots in Russia's regions and increase their role in politics. But the draft legislation also contains numerous provisions that would give the state new levers to regulate and manipulate parties and restrict the activities of those that it finds distasteful.

So far, Putin has staked out a program that balances between advocates of state-centered policies and advocates of liberalization, his decisions often favoring the former on the political front and the latter on the economy. However, there are good reasons to believe that this eclectic combination will not be sustainable and that pressures will build for his administration to move more resolutely in either a more liberal or authoritarian direction.

***The Russian public—and even moreso, Russian elites—continue to support democratic values by solid majorities. Most Russians identify as their first priority decisive action to halt the state's loss of capacity to provide essential services and to create a basis for sustained economic growth.***

First, many analysts agree that the administration's economic policies, albeit relatively liberal, have not been decisive enough to put the economy on track toward steady growth. But moving more decisively would mean backing controversial steps to reduce state subsidies to social groups that could undermine Putin's favorable public image. Moreover, the repressive environment created by government pressure on independent media will not produce the kind of open and intrusive journalism required to mount a serious attack on entrenched official corruption and decisively change the climate for domestic and foreign investment—critical to sustained economic growth.

## Russian Democracy and Western Influence

American presidents have long recognized the advance of pluralism and democracy in Russia as a vital national interest. In the short run, security and regional issues and economic cooperation demand most of our policymakers' time. In the long run, Russia's successful adoption of vibrant democratic institutions will be the single most important factor in producing a bilateral relationship in which common interests and international cooperation predominate.

From the 1970s into the 1990s, U.S. officials productively engaged leaders from Brezhnev to Yeltsin on issues ranging from human rights and freedom of emigration to general principles of democracy. Soviet and then Russian leaders sometimes bridled at U.S. interventions on internal issues, but the importance of the U.S. relationship to Russia's global aspirations impelled them to engage on these issues and often to respond.

The difficult legacy of the Yeltsin years—along with a perception by many Russians that the United States supported his policies—have increased skepticism about U.S. advice in Moscow and made it harder for American leaders to get their Russian counterparts to listen. This attitude has been solidified by the widespread impression in Russia that U.S. foreign policies in the 1990s were designed to use Russia's weakness to advance American interests.

### Do You Agree that the United States is Utilizing Russia's Current Weakness to Reduce it to a Second-Rate Power?

	<u>1995</u>	<u>1997</u>	<u>1999</u>	<u>2000</u>
<b>Agree</b>	<b>59%</b>	<b>71%</b>	<b>76%</b>	<b>81%</b>

(Source: Public opinion survey of a nationwide sample of adults in Russia sponsored by the U.S. Department of State Office of Research; Memorandum M-30-00).

Yet the United States retains a substantial influence in Russia and, in conjunction with European allies, can have a significant impact on the direction of its internal development. Although disenchantment with Yeltsin-era reforms has given new credibility to talk about a “third way” between East and West, opinion polls show that the preponderant proportion of the Russian elite continues to see movement toward a market economy, Western-style institutions, and closer integration with Europe as Russia's only path to a prosperous future. Putin and his team have associated themselves with this view. Moscow political elites are wary of U.S. tutorials, but they view U.S. and Western investment as critical for renewed economic growth. Large majorities of the Russian public, while skeptical of U.S. intentions, say they want to expand cooperation with the United States.

### Elements of an American Policy to Support Russian Democracy

The determination to identify solutions that serve Russia's interests as well as skepticism about American intentions indicate that American influence, even if still potent, must be exercised carefully. The record of American engagement with Russian leaders, as well as interviews with Russian and American proponents of democratic change, suggest several elements of an American policy.

**Make Democracy Issues an Essential Part of the U.S.-Russia Dialogue** Russians engaged in the effort to advance democratic institutions say that their work will be made easier—and the efforts of government authorities to impede their efforts made more difficult—if U.S. leaders send a clear message that the fate of democracy in Russia matters to the United States. With internal opponents of authoritarian drift weakened by the government's moves against independent voices and by Putin's broad popular support, the international community's voice will be even more important. Sending a message that democracy matters means weaving the issue into the fundamental structure of U.S. policy through public statements by administration leaders and through America's bilateral exchanges at all levels. It does not mean that Russian democracy need compete for equal time with security, regional, and other issues for the day-to-day attention of policymakers.

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Russian leaders will not agree to a dialogue which appears to sanction one-sided U.S. intervention on Russian behavior. Handled properly, however, democracy issues can be broached with Russian leaders on two levels. Working jointly with the Europeans, the United States can fold democracy into a dialogue dedicated to Russia's path toward membership in key Western and global institutions, such as the European Union, the World Trade Organization, and NATO. This approach would have the benefit of placing these issues in the context of Russia's own priorities and of presenting a united Western front rather than singling out the United States as the interlocutor. More sensitive issues can be handled in smaller, informal, private exchanges, just as a range of issues such as human rights and official corruption have been handled in the past.

**Weave Support for Integration into American Policy**

Making it clear that U.S. support for Russia's integration with the West is not just rhetoric but an essential feature of American strategy will give added credibility to U.S. interventions on democracy issues. U.S. approaches to such deeply controversial policies as NATO enlargement and national missile defense should be constructed in a way that clearly invites Russian participation and undermines the assertions of anti-American elements in the elite that Russia is not welcome in the West. A convincing strategy for Russia's integration means working to create specific mechanisms and an agreed road map for Russia's entry into NATO, the European Union, World Trade Organization, and other international bodies. It does not mean belittling the obstacles that remain in the way or offering Russia any special advantages.

Making America's rhetoric about Russia's integration into the West credible will work to the advantage of internal advocates of democratization and integration with the West by demonstrating that integration is possible and that Russia stands to gain concrete benefits. On the other hand, policies that convey that the United States does not seek Russia's integration, or doubts that it can happen, will give ammunition to those who insist that Russia should seek another path.

**Forge a United Front with European Allies** In setting integration with the West as an objective, the Putin administration is focused primarily on Europe. European opinion matters even more than American to Russia's political elite. Some European leaders have shown a willingness to confront Putin administration officials on concerns about democracy while others have held back.

The ability of the United States to have an impact will be undermined if the U.S. positions are not shared widely in the alliance, repeated with conviction, and repeated often. The United States can take the lead in facilitating a common approach to democracy issues among the allies.

**Focus on Fundamental Democratic Principles** The United States can be confident and persistent in asking Russia to support actions that advance freedom of expression, competitive elections, strong guarantees of civil liberties, and the rule of law. These principles have wide support in Russian society, and when they have been applied by new governments around the globe, they have facilitated economic prosperity and political stability. If implemented in a manner appropriate for Russian conditions, they will have the same effect on Russia.

However, the United States should tread carefully as it engages Russian leaders on specific issues in order to avoid embroiling itself in matters it does not fully understand and having an impact its leaders do not intend.

For example, the United States can assert that Russia needs national television channels independent of government control—as administration spokesmen did early this year in the controversy surrounding the channel NTV—while avoiding comment on individual actions by the government agencies, companies, and shareholders involved in the dispute.

Whatever the West's private calculations about President Putin's responsibility for anti-democratic actions, it will be more productive to construct diplomatic engagement with Russia on democracy issues in a manner that avoids forcing Putin into an anti-democratic box. By focusing on principles instead of personalities, America can invite Russian leaders to agree with the principles, to dissociate themselves from anti-democratic behaviors, and to take credit for actions that advance democratic behavior by their subordinates.

**Free Press, Competitive Elections, and Rule of Law** American and Western influence will be most effective if it is used sparingly and focused on critical issues. The essential ingredients to facilitate Russian solutions to Russian problems are a press protected from excessive state influence, in which proponents of change can air their ideas, and a level playing field in national and regional elections, where those proponents can compete for political power. American and Russian interests also overlap in according priority to achieving a stronger judicial system and a legal system that holds both individuals and state institutions accountable.

**Target Democracy Assistance** Over the last decade, government-funded democracy assistance programs have increasingly been targeted away from central government agencies toward non-governmental organizations and away from Moscow toward Russia's regions. This trend makes sense as a recognition of the decisive role that grassroots organizations will play in deepening Russian democracy over the longer term. But democratically inclined government officials are essential allies of Russia's nongovernmental organizations, and it would be a mistake to forsake assistance to state institutions when there is a demonstrated commitment to democratic change.

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- Grassroots support to independent media and to organizations seeking to ensure open and transparent elections—the first line of defense against authoritarian tendencies—should receive particular priority. The 2003 Russian Duma elections will be a critical test of the government's commitment to fair elections.
- The United States should be prepared to step up its involvement with the government on rule of law programs if recent signs of top-level backing for a new push toward judicial reform continue to bear fruit.

How Russia chooses to move toward becoming a vibrant democratic state is for its leaders to decide, but whether Russia succeeds in building a deeper democracy, and how soon, is a vital concern for America. Successful integration with the West will require difficult choices in Moscow, but it also demands a deliberate strategy by American policymakers.

By its choice of diplomacy, policies, and programs, the United States can either stimulate the forces working for integration or give new life to forces that see Russia's national interest best served by a more authoritarian approach to governance.

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