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Democracy: Russia's Unfinished Business

In the fall of 2001 President Vladimir Putin decided to align Russia with the United States in a global war on terrorism. The invigorated U.S.-Russian relationship that followed has given new momentum to a formerly halting and uncertain post-Soviet march by Russia toward integration with the West. In the wake of September 11, few Western analysts now dispute that integration is the objective of President Putin and his team, even if the discomfort this objective has caused some of Russia's foreign policy elites is plainly evident.

Facilitating Russia's integration with the West holds the promise of contributing to American national interests and a more stable, peaceful, and prosperous world order. The Bush administration has recognized this potential and announced Russia's integration as an important goal of American foreign policy. Russian officials are already at work on the lengthy process of implementing policies and procedures needed to prepare Russia for entry into or closer cooperation with such organizations as the European Union and the World Trade Organization.

In the most fundamental sense, the factor that determines the pace and success of Russia's move toward integration will be the political order it builds on the ruins of communism. It is the virtual consensus of Western observers, and many in Russia too, that Russia's effort to build strong and vibrant democratic institutions in the decade since the Soviet collapse has stalled somewhere between democracy as understood in the West and the highly authoritarian order Russia inherited from the USSR. Imparting new momentum to Russia's movement toward deeper democracy will be critical to its integration with the West. A half-democratic Russia will at best be a half-ally of the United States.[1]

Why the Conventional Wisdom Is Wrong

Pessimism about the prospects for Russia's movement toward deeper democracy in the foreseeable future has become close to conventional wisdom. Many see recent steps by Russia's government to "manage" Russia's political institutions and place limits on opposition as a secular trend that is widely popular in the population and the elite, an understandable reaction to the political chaos and economic downturn associated with the tenure of former president Boris Yeltsin. Many would say that Russia is doomed to a period of semiauthoritarianism, and some would even accept it as a perhaps unpleasant but necessary stage in Russia's development.[2] In this book I present evidence that I believe shows that this conventional wisdom is far too pessimistic about the potential for political change and far too confident about the stability of the current half-democratic, half-authoritarian order.

Sizing Up the Current State of Russian Democracy

The political and societal leaders who started Russia's democratic revolution in the second half of the 1980s and the early 1990s disagreed on many things but shared a common conviction that Russia's future prosperity depended on a more pluralistic political order and more individual liberty. They would acknowledge that the revolution they began remains far from finished.[3]

Russian and American analysts vary widely in their assessments of Russia's success so far in building a democratic state, but much of this difference reflects the choice of different yardsticks with which to measure Russian reality. Some measure Russia in comparison to where it has been, while proponents of Western-style democracy measure Russia according to where they believe it still needs to go.

Viewed in the context of Russian history and the political reality of the USSR before Mikhail Gorbachev's election as Communist Party leader in March 1985, proponents of Russian democracy see substantial gains. Russian politics today is profoundly more pluralistic than before 1985. Competitive elections as the means to select leaders at all levels are common and widely accepted as the basis of legitimacy. Freedom of expression is dramatically expanded. U.S. government reports and assessments by nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) that track democracy issues in Russia agree that individual rights are better protected now than under the USSR. There has been some modest progress toward a rule of law that applies to the state as well as ordinary citizens, evident for instance in formal changes in the constitution and legal code and in citizens' increased resort to the court system.

In contrast, the reality of democracy in Russia falls far short when it is measured against the standards of established Western democracies and the aspirations of those prodemocracy political forces who brought down the communist system in 1991. Practice lags far behind Russia's success in creating formal democratic structures:

—Power remains concentrated in the executive branch, while legislative and judicial institutions remain too weak to create effective checks on the executive.

—More so than in established democracies, critical decisions are often made through corrupt relationships with government officials, informal networks, and personal connections to the president and his team rather than through formal democratic institutions and procedure.

—Economic hardship, the dependence of many institutions and individuals on state subsidies, and the lack of a robust "civil society"—that is, a network of nongovernment organizations able to put pressure on polit-

ical leaders—leave individual liberties vulnerable to state intervention. Violations of civil liberties and state harassment of independent journalists and civic activists are on the rise since the late 1990s.

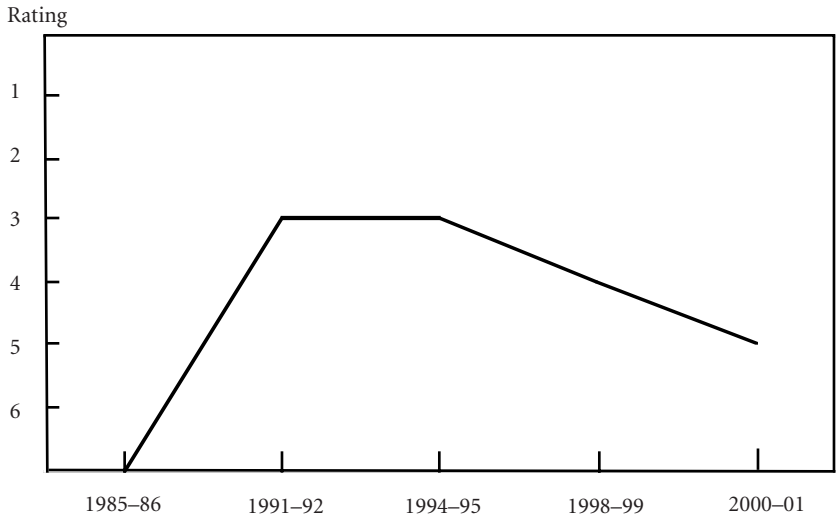
—Official corruption remains pervasive and the pace of movement toward a rule of law glacial.

Many observers characterize Russia as an "electoral democracy," emphasizing the degree to which the practice of multicandidate, competitive elections for choosing Russian leaders has gained greater purchase in Russia than have reliable guarantees of individual rights or a culture in which the rule of law holds sway. For many Russians, even those citizens who value greater freedom, the era of democracy has brought with it a lower standard of living, increased lawlessness, and a less just society. The practice of democracy varies widely across Russia's eleven time zones, and it is especially under challenge in some of Russia's eighty-nine regions where political parties, the idea of a separation of powers, and a free press are less well developed than in the large cities or at the national level.

Freedom House, a nonpartisan nongovernmental organization that measures and promotes democracy, provides the most systematic and widely accepted rating of the degree of democracy in Russia and other countries across the globe. The trend in the ratings Freedom House has assigned Russia since the mid-1980s is consistent with this summary of the strengths and shortcomings of Russia's progress toward democracy. Freedom House's panel of experts acknowledged significant gains in political rights, individual liberties, and rule of law in the last years of the Gorbachev era and the first years under President Yeltsin. But Freedom House figures describe a pattern of stagnation and even retreat from those advances since the mid-1990s. In recent reports, the organization dropped Russia's rating for political liberties on its seven-point scale from four to five, leaving Russia with a current rating of five for both political and civil liberties—at the low end of the category that Freedom House calls "partly free" (figures 1-1 and 1-2).

Thoughtful observers disagree on the reasons for Russia's failure to complete the construction of an effective democratic order in the ten years since the demise of the USSR. Some emphasize the legacy of seventy

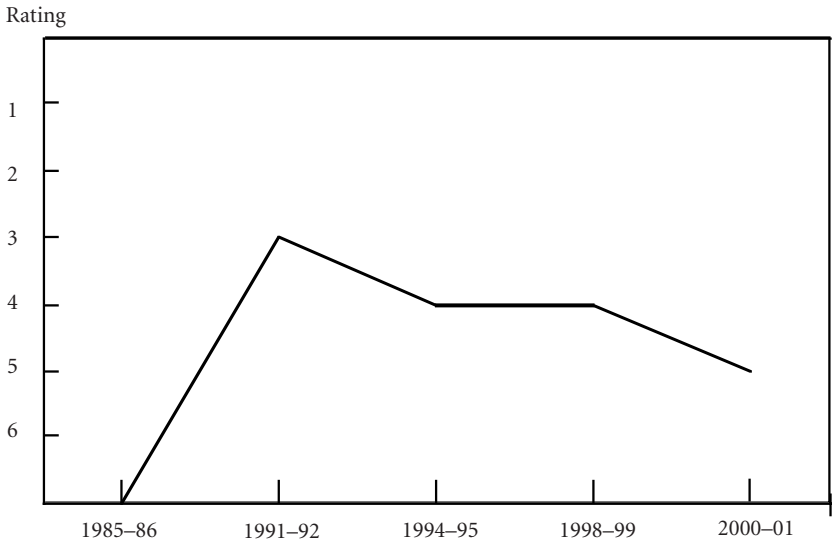
Figure 1-1. *Measuring Russia's Democracy: Political Rights*[a]



Source: Freedom House, Annual Survey of Freedom House Ratings (www.freedomhouse.org).

a. The Annual Survey of Freedom Country Ratings 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 from 1 to 7, 1 represents the most democratic. Countries ranking between 5.5 and 7 are considered not free.

Figure 1-2. *Measuring Russia's Democracy: Civil Liberties*



Source: See figure 1-1.

years of communist misrule. Others cite Russia's lack of historical experience with democratic values and behavior and the challenges of changing an inherited political culture. Still others emphasize leadership failures, especially Yeltsin's Byzantine, paternalistic style of rule and his failure to put priority on building viable institutions to fill the vacuum left by the collapse of communism. The evidence suggests that political habits inherited from the Soviet order, inexperience with the sometimes frustrating norms of democratic behavior, and leadership mistakes all contributed to current shortcomings.

The most important question for Russia today is not how to explain the past but how to chart a reliable path to deeper democracy in the future. More specifically, the challenge for proponents of Russian democracy is how to build support for a way forward in the immediate future, not in a vaguely defined "long term." In the long term, few if any would disagree that a stable and vigorous Russian democracy depends on a prosperous economy, the growth of a middle class determined to protect its private property rights, and a plethora of politically inclined and activist organizations in Russia's civil society willing and eager to hold its leaders to account. Few if any would disagree that over the longer term Russia's political future will follow a trajectory toward stronger democracy.

The Potential for Democratic Development in the Near Term

My focus is on the prospects for the near term—where there is more uncertainty and more debate about what to expect. There is more volatility in the current political environment in Russia than current headlines would suggest. There is more potential for change, in a democratic or antidemocratic direction. In this kind of environment, development of stronger democratic institutions in Russia is not guaranteed. But it is also not precluded. How this potential for change is realized will depend on political leadership in Russia and the West.

The factors that will determine the prospects for building stronger democratic institutions in the short term are different from those that will shape the longer term. In the short term, the potential for progress is less

dependent on slowly changing structural factors such as economic prosperity and the size of the middle class and more dependent on current political attitudes, political leadership, and unforeseen political events. Measuring the potential for movement in a democratic or antidemocratic direction in the short term means paying close attention to the current spectrum of political opinion in the elite and society and in particular to assessing the support for current policies and the willingness to countenance political change. It means determining the degree to which Russians believe their current political institutions measure up to the kind of institutions they want and demand.

Russia is no longer a country where a handful of leaders at the top can for long dictate its political direction. A political course substantially out of alignment with political sentiments in society is a course that is unstable and subject to significant, and possibly sudden, change.

Popular Support for Democracy

Many analysts who are skeptical of the potential for movement toward stronger Russian democratic institutions in the near term base their conclusion on what they see as the prevalence of attitudes hostile to deeper democracy in Russian society. A systematic look at the results of professionally administered public opinion surveys—the best available data on popular attitudes in Russia—simply provides no support for the notion that popular attitudes are the cause of Russia's failure to move quickly toward stronger democratic institutions. These surveys are conducted by several of the serious Russian polling companies that have emerged in the past decade: the results of their research are published regularly in Russian print media and Internet websites.

Survey results suggest that support for values and institutions typically identified in the West with democracy is relatively low compared with support for those values expressed by publics in most Western democracies and even many developing democracies in eastern Europe and elsewhere around the globe. Substantial minorities express support for potentially antidemocratic policies, indicating that, after a decade of

political instability and economic decline, there is less consensus in Russia about the kind of political order that should be built than there is in most mature democracies.

The more notable feature of these results, however, is that stable majorities have continued to express their view that democratic institutions and values are the right path for Russia despite the hardships that the past ten years have brought. Moreover, for the purpose of assessing support for democratic change, the most important measures are not the ones that compare Russian attitudes to those of publics in other countries but the ones that measure Russians' support for democratic values relative to the degree to which they believe their current institutions and government policies work to provide for and protect those values. On this scale, survey results show that Russians are highly critical of the shortcomings of their present democratic institutions and ready to back leaders who will push for stronger and more effective institutions.

There is simply no evidence to support the notion that Russians want more authoritarian institutions and much evidence to suggest they want change. Surveys show nostalgia for the Soviet era, but a closer look at these data indicate that the nostalgia is for the political stability and economic and social safety net that the USSR provided, not for its degree of political freedom.

Support for Democracy among Russian Elites

Some would say that, even if the public is willing to support democratic change, it is the opinion of Russia's elites that matters and Russia's elites are more antidemocratic than the Russian public. This argument understates the diversity in the political attitudes of Russia's elites and does not stand up to a systematic look at the results of widely available survey data on elite attitudes. Surveys of a representative cross section of Russia's political, business, and social elites indicate that, on the contrary, support for democratic values is consistently stronger among elites, sometimes much stronger, than among the Russian public. This result should not be surprising, since it is consistent with what opinion surveys show to be the case in many other countries.

Lessons learned from the experience of other countries facing the challenges of movement from an authoritarian order to a more democratic and pluralistic framework indicate that one of the greatest challenges is overcoming the resistance of the relatively narrow but entrenched segment of the elite that benefits from the existing order and stands to lose privileges in the open environment created by deeper democracy. The results of opinion surveys also suggest that in Russia too, it is not the public, or even the Russian elite as a whole, that stands in the way of democratic change in the near term but elements of the elite that are numerically small yet well positioned to impede political change. In this sense, a survey of societal attitudes in Russia suggests that latent support for democratic change in Russia is far more widespread than it seems on the surface and the defenders of the status quo far more isolated.

Everyone Favors Democracy, but What Kind?

As a theoretical concept, democracy faces no serious competitors in Russia today. The political debate has moved beyond the virulent divide between communists and "democrats" that prompted the political turbulence of the early and mid-1990s. Political figures that continue to suggest an ideological alternative to democracy no longer can gain much political traction ten years after the collapse of the communist order. Those who argue that Russia should seek some kind of special "third" or "Eurasian" way as an alternative to integration with the West seem to be in political decline. President Putin has said that there is no "third way" available.

But this considerable consensus on the idea of democracy and integration disguises fundamental differences in the elite about what kind of democracy should be constructed and in how much of a hurry Russia should be to construct it. Proponents of what some Russians call "managed democracy" subordinate democracy to the demands of rebuilding a strong Russian state. They appear to believe that building a strong state means a heavy hand for the state in deciding what kind of political development is necessary and in restricting the ability of any political opposition to assert a different point of view. In this environment, Russia's

proponents of rapid movement toward Western-style civil liberties and restraints on the state—who make up a small minority in the parliament and other political institutions in the public political arena—are on the defensive. The policies of President Putin's administration have so far reflected this managed democracy mind-set, combining important steps toward a more liberal and market-oriented economic order with government policies that have erected boundaries on political expression and created new mechanisms for the state to control opposition.

The Potential for a Democratic Shift

Despite the seeming calm on the surface, many factors are coming together to produce a political environment ripe for change. The current contradictory mix of economic freedom and political authoritarianism will not produce the results that Russians are seeking. Although fortuitous factors have produced a period of solid economic growth in President Putin's first years, increasingly, economic success will depend on greater political transparency and a stronger rule of law that semidemocracy-semiauthoritarianism will not produce. The determination of Putin and his team to move Russia toward integration with the West and restore Russia's credibility as a major global player will run up against the barriers of "managed democracy." Pressures will grow for the leadership to move in a more resolutely democratic direction—or to further turn the screws on rising opposition. Putin's interests as president will begin to diverge from those of individuals who back authoritarian policies as he gets a stronger grip on power. These pressures will bring to the surface the divisions in the Russian elite and impel the broad swath of political leaders in the political center to get off the fence and take sides.

What Should a Democratically Inclined Leadership Do?

President Putin's position will be critical. So far he has spoken eloquently about democracy and even more so about integration with Western institutions, while presiding over an administration that has muffled political opposition and placed new strictures on political expression. He will need

not only to come down more clearly in support of steps toward stronger democratic institutions but also to confront powerful constituencies in the federal bureaucracies and other vested interests who strongly oppose such steps. The pressures on him to do so will grow.

Confronting these powerful status quo constituencies will require far more than speeches or decrees. It will require mobilizing a coalition for change. The data I present suggest that there is a robust latent coalition for democratic change in Russia ready to be mobilized by strong leadership.

Should he choose to throw his weight behind a renewed push for democratic change, President Putin will find that Russia's proponents of deeper democracy have set out a sensible agenda appropriate to Russia's current conditions: key elements of that agenda include creating stronger checks on the executive branch, increasing the authorities of the parliament, building a more independent judiciary, creating a stronger, more competitive party system, stimulating democracy at the grass roots by enhancing the authority and the democratic character of local government, strengthening the structural foundations for an independent press, and building stronger guarantees for honest and transparent regional and national elections.

At the most fundamental level, the key to more vigorous economic and political growth is progress in reducing the power of entrenched elites, creating a more competitive political marketplace, and encouraging the development of a vigorous political opposition to those officials who are currently in charge. The single most important step that President Putin can take is to use his bully pulpit to encourage political opposition and throw the weight of the government behind steps that will expand rather than restrict the vigor of the political marketplace.

What Should America Do?

America's ability to support movement toward democracy in Russia and to deter movement in an authoritarian direction is substantial. Over the long term, government funding for programs that assist grassroots groups to develop a vigorous politically active civil society will be an important

influence on the quality of Russian democracy. But in the short term U.S. diplomatic engagement can make a difference.

Supporting Russian democracy does not mean telling Russia what programs to implement. Even if the West had the answers, Russians would not listen. They are wary of Western advice about specific reforms and institutions, and the experience of the 1990s has reinforced the determination of Russia's leaders, from across the political spectrum, to seek indigenous solutions. America's most important contribution will be to create an international context that supports and stimulates those domestic forces seeking to move Russia in a more resolute democratic direction and that opposes and impedes domestic forces that are holding Russia back.

Studies of post-communist experience in the former USSR and eastern Europe show that the most powerful factor fueling democratic change in these countries has been the pull of the West and the opportunity to join Western institutions. When the potential benefits of "joining Europe" and becoming a part of the Western community of nations have been apparent, domestic forces pushing for democratic change have been strengthened, and policies promoting democratic values have been accelerated.

This experience suggests that policies in Washington that signal that Russia's integration into Western institutions is not just rhetoric but a core element of American strategy can change the political climate and undercut the proponents of "managed democracy," who are at the same time the most articulate skeptics of Russian policies that identify Russia's national interests as compatible with those of the West. Policies that signal that Russia's forthright movement toward democracy, an independent press, guarantees for human rights, and the rule of law is a vital concern for the United States will embolden Russia's proponents of democratic institutions and deter actions by Russian government agencies to harass political activists and repress political opposition. A convincing embrace of Russia's aspirations to join the West creates the necessary conditions for the United States to establish a dialogue at many levels with Russian leaders on the kind of policies than can encourage deeper democracy and hence faster integration with the West.

The desire of Russia's elite and citizenry to join the community of prosperous nations assures us that we have significant influence on how Russian democracy develops. The strategic reorientation toward the West prompted by September 11 only adds to U.S. influence and ability to carry on a dialogue about democracy in the context of cooperative relations. The history of U.S. diplomatic interaction with Russian leaders from Leonid Brezhnev through Putin suggests that U.S. engagement on issues of democracy and human rights has impact, even if that impact is not always immediately apparent.

Democracy in Russia Matters

Russia's development in a democratic direction is a vital national security concern to Russia and to the United States.

For Russia, studies of global development across many different countries suggest that democracy, with traits appropriate to Russia's history and conditions, is the most reliable way to build the strong and stable political institutions that all its citizens, across the political spectrum, desire. Democratic institutions produce strong states.[4] Faster progress toward deeper democracy, and the transparency that goes with it, is a proven way of reducing the hold of corrupt elites on the pinnacles of authority and unleashing individual initiative. Unleashing individual initiative is a necessary step toward the more just and prosperous society that Russians seek.

For the United States, Russia's development toward stronger democracy is a matter of practical national interest. The history of U.S. relations with established democracies suggests that a Russia with better-entrenched democratic institutions will be a more cooperative partner in the international arena, finding its national interests more compatible with American and Western interests than would a more authoritarian government. Proponents of stronger democracy and expanded individual liberties in Russia's domestic political debate are also proponents of Russia's full-scale integration into Western political and economic institutions.

On a day-to-day basis, Russian democracy does not need to compete with terrorism, security, or regional issues for equal time on the U.S. administration's agenda. But from a longer-term perspective, Russia's success in integrating into Western institutions and completing the transition to a strong, vibrant democratic state will be the most important factor creating the basis for a peaceful relationship and driving the United States and Russia toward a community of national interests. A substantial literature that examines the origins of war and peace during the past two centuries indicates that mature democracies do not resort to conflict to resolve their differences—a result of the sway of democratic norms for resolving conflict and the influence on state policy of those who would have to pay the price for conflict.[5] With the two countries edging toward greater consensus on security and regional issues, increasingly, democracy will loom large as an element of unfinished bilateral business.

Russia's success in building a more vibrant democracy will also have reverberations on the fate of efforts to construct democracy in the rest of the world. This is certainly the case with its neighbors in the political space of the former Soviet Union, where in many cases democratic progress remains as much under challenge—or more—as in Russia. Russia's success or failure in building a stronger democracy will pull its neighbors in the same direction. Students of global democracy see Russia as a "swing state" whose success or failure will have an impact on other countries across the globe whose efforts to build democracy are failing or stalled.[6]