

A Strategy to Encourage Democracy In the Newly Independent States

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“If Russia fails in its reforms . . . a dictator will arise.”

—President Boris Yeltsin
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Both President Clinton and former President Bush have given eloquent speeches about the urgent need to help those genuinely seeking to make the transition to democracy and market-oriented economies in Russia and the other post-Soviet republics. The leaders in both major political parties need to understand that there is an urgency deriving from the continued strength of the anti-reform forces, and that missing this once-in-a-century opportunity to help bring democracy to Russia could lead to new dangers in the near future. Such a dictatorship, whether of the far left or far right, is likely to use coercion at home and abroad, greatly increasing the risk of civil and international conflict. This in turn might require maintaining annual defense expenditures tens of billions of dollars greater than the United States currently plans. Since the unraveling of the Soviet state structure in December 1991—despite our enormous national interest in a democratic Russia—there has been far too little United States effort to assist genuinely pro-democratic Russian leaders and groups to build grass roots civic institutions such as political parties and civic associations.

At the end of World War II there was a bipartisan consensus in the United States concerning the need to rebuild defeated Germany, Italy, and Japan not only economically but also as political democracies. Major programs were launched to assist and encourage the growth of the full range of pro-democratic institutions and the return of civil society. Fortunately, these efforts succeeded despite the view of many at the time that none of the defeated aggressor countries were likely to become democratic. Imagine the mistake it would have been to have ignored the political institutions of Germany and Japan and instead provided help only for economic reconstruction. This mistake is being made in Russia and the former Soviet republics today despite lip service to the contrary.

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The United States, the other major industrial democracies, and international aid organizations have given attention to the serious macroeconomic problems of the transition, and have pledged about \$100 billion in assistance to Russia over the next several years. While economic improvement may be a necessary condition for a democratic future, it is by no means sufficient. In fact, many of those opposing genuine political democracy in the postcommunist states might be called “market authoritarians.” Their model is Communist China—a nuclear-armed, internationally assertive one-party dictatorship that permits some opening to a market economy and actively courts the benefits of Western trade and large scale economic aid from the World Bank and other organizations. Many in the West seem to believe that increased economic pluralism and prosperity in Russia, Ukraine, and the rest of the former Soviet Union will necessarily lead to political liberalization and ultimately to genuine democracy. This could occur but the lesson of contemporary history is that such a political transition is by no means inevitable or even likely.

Many rightist dictatorships in Europe (Spain, Portugal), Latin America (Brazil, Mexico, Argentina), and Asia (Taiwan, South Korea, Philippines) experienced decades of major structural economic improvements and increased prosperity without establishing democracy. Only the combination of the courageous quest for freedom by domestic pro-democratic groups and Western encouragement for their efforts along with changes in the views of the authoritarian ruling groups brought movement toward democracy. In fact, two countries with Communist regimes and long experience with economic pluralism, the former Yugoslavia (25 years) and China (15 years), demonstrate it is possible, in the absence of the development of pro-democratic civil institutions, for Communist dictatorships to rule by maintaining their hold on the military and secret police organizations. This, despite visible, dramatic, and widespread economic progress.

In the modern era, transitions from dictatorship have always required many years and have generally been fragile and reversible. Many mistakenly assume that the first free elections after a dictatorship mark the end of the transition process and that all will be well in the future. In fact, the remnants of long established dictatorships—of the right or left—will attempt to undermine newly elected leaders and governments and will work to reestablish their power and control by one means or another. This is happening in Russia and the other post-Soviet republics. In fact, looking at the fifteen former Soviet republics we can see three patterns: in Russia, the Baltic states, and Armenia there is an uneasy cogovernance of reform and anti-reform groups with each controlling different domains of public policy in an unstable process of continuing competition. In nuclear-armed Ukraine, Belarus, and Kazakhstan as well as in seven other mostly Central Asian republics, the republic-level Communist authorities have declared themselves to be nationalists and independent and have essentially

continued in power, only now as “market authoritarians.” And the third pattern—the full restoration of Communist rule—is visible in Tajikistan where the Communist hardliners have used violence to take full power again while systematically repressing opposition groups. An estimated 20,000 people have died and additional tens of thousands have fled to Afghanistan, Uzbekistan, and Russia.

There have been three major weak links in the post-Soviet reform process. First, the parliaments that continue to function in nearly all the post-Soviet republics were those elected in 1990 when the Communist Party was still dominant and before there was any real possibility of organizing genuinely pro-democratic movements. While some portion of

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the members of the Russian Parliament underwent conversion to the ideas of democracy, most did not and some of those who did reconsidered as the forces supporting the old regime became stronger. The only way Boris Yeltsin could advance his reforms was to dissolve the Supreme Soviet and remove holdouts by force before calling new elections.

Second, the major institutions in Russia and the other republics—including the economic ministries, the military, the KGB or its equivalent—continue to be controlled and staffed by the same Communists who were there before the unravelling of the Gorbachev regime in 1991. Large proportions of these individuals stand to lose their considerable privileges if reforms succeed. They are working together, using long-established contacts and relationships, to turn events in their direction. This is visible in the pressure brought to bear on Yeltsin and his reform team in Russia.

The third weak link is the absence in Russia and most of the other post-Soviet republics of influential grass-roots, pro-democratic political and civic institutions that could provide organized support for reform and organized opposition to gradualist restoration of the old regime. It is here that the United States and the West can provide significant and immediate help. Contrary to the often-repeated assertion that little can be done from the outside, the history of modern transitions from dictatorships demonstrates that very small amounts of political assistance competently given at the right time can make a decisive difference in the capacity of men and women committed to democracy to organize themselves. It is here that the United States needs to act and act quickly.

A strategy to encourage democracy in the former Soviet Union might include the following components.

1. The establishment at the highest level of the United States government of a democracy working group for Russia (and the other post-Soviet republics) to focus and coordinate all political and conventional assistance. President Clinton's appointment of Strobe Talbott as special ambassador for the post-Soviet republics and the selection of the skilled foreign service officer, Thomas Pickering, as ambassador to Russia was an excellent start in this direction. The President and his National Security Council should meet at least once a month to focus on this issue and receive reports on progress toward the institutionalization of democracy in Russia and the other post-Soviet republics. President Clinton must show his personal commitment to the effort, or it will surely continue to languish in the hazy mists of competing and uncertain United States bureaucracies.

2. Identification of major genuinely pro-democratic groups. It is essential to survey the entire spectrum of major existing political organizations and, based on their leadership, their programs, and their actions to date, identify the four or five most significant political parties, trade unions and civic associations which are genuinely pro-democratic. Most likely, such institutions will be found along the spectrum from the democratic left to the center to the democratic right. With careful and timely analysis, repeated on a regular basis (at least every several months in a rapidly evolving political situation) the result should be an inventory of pro-democratic groups and leaders who might be helped. It is especially important to remember that the KGB has a long history of establishing false anticommunist organizations both in order to delegitimize its opponents and to attract Western financial aid for the entities it secretly controls.

3. Design and implement a program of assistance to pro-democratic political parties and civic organizations. This can include funding to help them establish a staff which can seek new members, communicate with the public, and broaden their geographic base by establishing branch offices throughout Russia. It can also include practical training and workshops for leaders and members of the group in modern means of political communication (use of TV, radio, press events, newsletter, etc.), organizational management, polling, modern fund raising, recruitment of volunteers, issue analysis, and the formulation of programmatic positions.

At the present time, since the old regime remains dominant in so many of the major organizations of Russia, the only way aspiring pro-democratic leaders and groups can hope to compete is through foreign political assistance. In January 1992 the United States announced the Eurasia Foundation as a publicly funded but independently managed entity that could make small- and medium-sized grants to foster grass-roots, pro-democratic institutions. Unfortunately, the Eurasia Foundation was slow in getting started. President Clinton should step in

and move this initiative forward. While economic aid committed to Russia is running in the billions of dollars annually, political assistance funds of only \$10 to \$20 million annually—if well spent—could have an enormous and perhaps even decisive impact.

4. Link the availability of economic assistance to the ability of pro-democratic groups to organize and function. While it would be unrealistic to make the existence of a democratic government a pre-condition for Western economic assistance, it is reasonable and feasible to require existing regimes to permit pro-democratic groups the essential freedoms of speech, assembly, and organization. If these freedoms are eliminated, as in Tajikistan, all foreign aid should be terminated. If these freedoms are restricted as in Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and in many of the other post-Soviet republics, foreign aid should be reduced. One of the most important political resources the pro-democratic groups have to prevent repression and maintain their opportunity to build their strength is the moral, political, and practical support of the major democracies that have the economic assistance the post-Soviet republics want.

5. Channel some portion of international economic assistance through genuinely pro-democratic organizations. While it is inevitable that much economic assistance—especially that from the World Bank and IMF agencies—will be allocated to and through the current governments, there is every reason why the United States and the West should find ways to send a good portion of this economic assistance through genuinely pro-democratic civic organizations. For example, instead of allocating United States assistance for privatization only through the Russian government, genuinely independent Russian entrepreneurial organizations and labor unions should obtain some of these assistance funds for a “grass roots” rather than top-down approach to privatization. Humanitarian and other direct assistance to the population might be channeled through independent and pro-democratic civic associations, and the same might be done with funds for management training and other types of technical assistance. This would simultaneously expand the political functions of the pro-democratic organizations and give them valuable experience in administration. On the other hand, if all United States assistance is channeled through the Russian and other republic governmental structures, there is a likelihood that much of it will work to increase the influence of the old regime rather than to help liberalize the society.

6. Increase the domestic and international visibility of pro-democratic organizations and leaders. The pro-democratic leaders and movements need material help and resources indeed, but they also need the encouragement and recognition that derives from direct contact with Western leaders and

organizations. For that reason, it is important to establish a systematic program of visits to these leaders by Western legislators, government officials, political party leaders, experts, and others concerned with their destiny. Some of this could occur in conjunction with the political assistance and training described earlier. It can be very demoralizing when visiting Western political leaders meet only with the government and elements of the military-industrial structures from the old regime. Unless there is a clear intention to meet with these pro-democratic movements and their leaders, they will often be ignored by prominent Western visitors, further reducing their domestic political influence and aura.

Equally important, the leaders of these organizations in Russia should be invited to the United States and other Western countries for public and well-publicized events with a range of political leaders where they can offer their views about current developments and future trends. Such visits are important as a sign of solidarity with their political values, as an opportunity for Russian pro-democratic leaders to inform us about their vision of the current needs of their country, and as a way for them to gain political stature at home through their associations in the West.

7. Translate and distribute widely a synthesis of the classical writings defining the case for political and economic liberty. Ideas do have consequences and it is important to find creative ways to make the ideas of those who have defined the cause of political and economic liberty (Jefferson, Lincoln, Tocqueville, Mill, and modern leaders from Franklin Roosevelt to Ronald Reagan) available to those individuals seeking to lead pro-democratic organizations and to those educators at all levels who might have an interest. We can easily underestimate the value of such a collection translated into Russian and other languages of the former Soviet republics.

8. Assist democratic political organizations to establish simulated or “model” local, regional, or national governments for high school and university students. The United States has a long and successful experience in helping high school and university students learn about political institutions and behavior through the use of simulated or “model” institutions involving the students playing the role of different participants. With very modest resources, it should be possible to help pro-democratic parties and civic groups establish three- to four-day workshops during school vacations where university and high school students would establish and participate in “model” local, regional, or national governments. Well implemented, such model government experiences could educate high school and university students in the issues facing their country and in the challenges of democratic governance. Such model governments would undoubtedly bring a great deal of media and public attention as they first began to function in the many regions of Russia. They could also

serve to inspire some portion of the participants to become future pro-democratic activists.

9. Implement the Democracy Corps. With bipartisan support, Congress has already approved funding for a Democracy Corps of United States volunteers who would live in one of fifty democracy houses to be established throughout Russia. These United States volunteers would complement the important work of the Peace Corps volunteers who are in Russia and several other post-Soviet republics to promote small business development and to teach English (about 2,000 volunteers will be in Russia and eight other republics by the end of 1993). The Democracy Corps should include individuals with training in the relevant languages, who have worked in political, labor, business, civic, and other voluntary associations, and who understand that a democratic Russia is possible, and if attained will contribute immensely to the well being of the 400 million people in all of the postcommunist transition countries, as well as to the prospects for international peace.

Some will object to these and other forms of political assistance as constituting intervention in the internal affairs of Russia and the other post-Soviet republics. Quite clearly, the pro-democratic leaders of Russia have made evident that they seek massive economic assistance—itsself a form of intervention especially when macroeconomic conditions are prescribed for the recipient governments—but they also seek help in moving toward democracy. After decades of dictatorship where many leaders and foot soldiers of the old regime remain virtually in place in the major existing institutions, the failure of the United States and other Western countries to provide political assistance is contrary to our national interest. It also contradicts our obligation to those who share our political values and whom we have so often called upon to move in the direction of freedom. Now that these courageous but scattered and mostly invisible pro-democratic leaders and groups are trying to increase their political presence, it is time for the United States and the West to help in a competent and meaningful way.

Everything suggested here should be done openly and through appropriate means that are legal within the context of the societies in which the political assistance is to be given. If those regimes decide to prevent or inhibit this assistance to pro-democratic groups, then the United States and the West can and should decide to reduce economic assistance—there is no value in using the resources of the American people to increase the economic power of authoritarian regimes, especially if these possess nuclear weapons.

The strategy proposed here is open, peaceful, and consensual. With our help, it might be possible for the peoples of Russia and the other post-Soviet republics to make the transition from the unraveling of communism to genuinely free and

representative institutions with human rights and liberty for all.