

The Difficult but Necessary Task of Supporting Democrats in Russia

By Nicolas Bouchet

In Brief: There seems to be no prospect of political change in Russia, yet the run-up to the 2018 presidential election could be a delicate time for the regime. Putin's next term could also be turbulent. During this time, relations with the West are not likely to improve much, if at all.

Europe and the United States could ignore Russia's political situation when its foreign policy was friendlier. Today's combination of internal repression and external confrontation should encourage them to re-engage with promoting democracy in Russia. The question is how to do so, given the limited impact of previous efforts, and that the regime has made it very difficult for outsiders to help democratic actors.

To keep providing a long-term lifeline to Russia's democratic actors, democracy promoters have shifted to "offshoring" and "onlining," to working through expatriates, and on to broader civil-society support. These efforts are necessary but have drawbacks — and they are certainly not silver bullets. Still, continuing and building on the low-key support provided is an important and affordable investment by Europe and the United States in the survival of democratic elements in Russian society that can campaign for change and play a positive role in the event of a systemic crisis.

Events in Russia in 2016 suggested that there is no prospect of political change in the country for the foreseeable future, and especially not in the run-up to the next presidential election in 2018. The regime appears to be more secure than ever and President Vladimir Putin dominates political life. United Russia and the "systemic" (i.e. co-opted) opposition are still the only parties represented in the Duma, while the "non-systemic" opposition remains in disarray, following parliamentary elections that were more subtly rigged than previous ones.¹ The low turnout — officially reported at slightly under 50 percent, but is in reality even lower — suggested public apathy or resignation with the political situation. Unlike in the 2011-12 parliamentary presidential electoral cycle, when large protests surprised the authorities, there was no popular outcry. Meanwhile the regime has become more monolithic through elite reshuffles and security services reorganization.

Yet the months leading up to the time when Putin is expected to secure another term might be a delicate. For one thing, the level of risk could rise if the economy does not improve and the standard of living of Russians declines further.² Even if Putin secures another term in 2018, it could be more turbulent than previous ones, with rising uncertainty about what comes after.³ Would Putin seek another term regardless of the constitutional limit, or install a successor, attempt a "job swap" as he did when he left the presidency to be prime minister in 2008–12, or look for a new arrangement to stay in control?

¹ Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, "Russian Federation, State Duma Elections, 18 September 2016: OSCE/ODIHR Election Observation Mission Final Report", 23 December 2016, <http://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/russia/290861>.

² CNBC, "Russia will have exhausted \$87 billion wealth fund by 2017, amid oil price slide", 5 July 2016, <http://www.cnbc.com/2016/07/05/russia-to-empty-one-of-its-sovereign-funds-next-year--ministry-proposal.html>.

³ See for example Denis Volkov, "Russia of the Mid-2020s: Breakdown of the Political Order", Jamestown Foundation, 6 July 2016, <https://jamestown.org/program/denis-volkov-russia-of-the-mid-2020s-breakdown-of-the-political-order/>.



Over the next few years, Russia's relations with the West will probably remain difficult. Its actions in Ukraine and Syria, attempts to upset Europe's security architecture, and challenges to the United States' global influence show no sign of abating. Russian interference in elections and politics is a growing cause of concern in Europe and the United States. While Donald Trump has expressed a strong affinity for Putin, this does not automatically mean that U.S.–Russian relations will improve significantly during his presidency. Europe remains relatively divided over what line to take with Russia, but so far predictions that it would break with the harder U.S. line over the conflict in Ukraine, specifically with regard to sanctions, have not come true. Even a victory for Russia-friendly François Fillon in the coming French presidential election is not guaranteed to change this, especially if Chancellor Angela Merkel remains in office in Germany. Therefore, relations between Russia and the West are unlikely to become more amicable while Putin tries to secure another term as president or after.

Over the last 20 years, Europe and the United States have mostly tolerated Russia's political deterioration, but the worsening of relations has reached a point where it is time to rethink. At least until the end of Putin's next presidential term, the West is faced with the choice of whether to ignore Russia's internal affairs entirely and focus only on its behavior abroad, or to seek ways to help it in a more democratic direction, not only because this aligns with their values but also in the hope that this will make its foreign policy less confrontational. Ignoring Russia's political situation was easier when its actions abroad were still generally acceptable to the West. Today's combination of internal repression and external confrontation should encourage European and U.S. policymakers to re-engage with the highly vexed issue of promoting democracy in Russia. And for those who do think about this, the question remains how to do so, given the limited impact of previous efforts and that the regime has spent more than a decade building defenses against it.

For and Against Democracy Promotion

The case for refraining from promoting democracy in Russia is the traditional realist one that the internal affairs of a country should not be a concern of others and that its external behavior is determined by its geopolitical interests rather than its political system. Thus, a more democratic Russia will not automatically mean a Russian foreign policy more acceptable to the West. The apparent rise in nationalist sentiment in Russia in recent years reinforces this view. While the deterioration of democracy under Putin has paralleled the rise of a more confrontational foreign policy, the more democratic Russia of the 1990s often opposed

Western interests too. In those years, the United States and Europe achieved goals in relation to Russia more because Russia was unable to resist them than because of a desire for the same things. Furthermore, democracy promotion in Russia has been inconsistent and limited, with a small impact. Persisting with it might even strengthen a regime that plays the nationalist card against foreign interference.

Beyond the ethical argument for supporting Russians who demand rights that are taken for granted in the West, the main case for persevering with democracy promotion is that Russia's political system and the regime this produces (which in turn perpetuates the system) does influence how it behaves abroad. This is the case in particular toward its neighbors, which then creates problems with Europe and the United States, as seen in Georgia and Ukraine. Putin's increasingly authoritarian regime clearly sees its survival at home and its international goals as linked to the political systems in countries it considers within its sphere of influence.⁴ It takes the spread of Western political norms in these states as synonymous with the spread of Western geopolitical influence. A more democratic Russia would still defend its interests in the region, but it might do so in ways more tolerant of its neighbors' domestic and international choices, and refrain from using force and coercion toward them. Finally, the nature of Russia's system also matters because of the country's influence on, and the example it sets for, others in Eastern Europe, the Caucasus, and Central Asia. Democratic progress in Russia could encourage a diffusion effect in these regions.

There is less scope today than at any time since the dissolution of the Soviet Union for outsiders to help Russia in a democratic direction. What is more, they show little appetite for the endeavor. In the United States, there has been a broader questioning of democracy promotion.⁵ The administration led by Trump, who has never showed any interest in it, could turn away from it altogether. In Europe, having to respond to financial and refugee crises allows governments with a concern for democracy assistance less bandwidth and resources to pursue this, even if it has never been a major budget item. On both sides of the Atlantic, this leaves the issue to be championed — as usual — by a relatively small num-

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Russia's political system influences how it behaves abroad.”

4 Nicolas Bouchet, “Russia and the Democracy Rollback in Europe”, German Marshall Fund of the United States, May 2015, <http://www.gmfus.org/publications/russia-and-democracy-rollback-europe>.

5 Thomas Carothers, “Is The United States Giving Up On Supporting Democracy Abroad?”, *Foreign Policy*, 8 September 2016, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2016/09/08/is-the-united-states-giving-up-on-supporting-democracy-abroad/>.

ber of politicians, policymakers in foreign ministries and development agencies, and democracy nongovernmental organizations.

Some — mostly in the United States — advocate a more forceful approach at the highest level. This would link democracy to all aspects of relations with Russia, include stronger sanctions and targeting of illicit financial assets of regime figures, and offer visible official support for democratic activists and politicians.⁶ Others argue that it would be more productive to devote the limited resources and political capital that democracy promotion has on the low-key work of sustaining existing assistance and improving its efficiency. The two approaches are not mutually exclusive, but the low-key one is likely to define efforts toward Russia in the next few years, with the support provided today through different channels continuing at its current level.

A Limited Track Record

The United States tried to promote democracy in Russia in the 1990s, though security interests and reforming the economy were higher priorities.⁷ Its policies were flawed in many ways and unequal to the size of the task, but they helped state institutions and civil society progress in the early years of Russia trying to shake off its Soviet legacy. This engagement was already waning before Putin came to power as the United States became disillusioned with Russia's evolution. In the 2000s, Washington continued to place security cooperation ahead of democracy, despite growing tensions over the Iraq War and potential NATO membership for Georgia and Ukraine. There was some attention paid to the issue in President George W. Bush's second term. President Barack Obama's "reset" again saw the United States trying to deal pragmatically with Russia and de-linking democracy from other issues.⁸ This included the goal of dual-track engagement with Russia's government and civil society; for example, one of the working groups of the Bilateral Presidential Commission was devoted to civil society. Initially muted in its comments on Russia's democratic failings, the Obama administration became more critical after the 2011-12 elections and the start of the Ukraine conflict. Overall, though, it has not treated democracy as a priority in dealing with Russia.

European democracy promotion in Russia has been more limited

6 See, for example, Democracy & Human Rights Working Group, "Human Rights, Democracy and the Rule of Law in Russia: Making the Case", McCain Institute for International Leadership, July 2016, <https://www.mccaininstitute.org/programs/human-rights-and-democracy/working-group-making-the-case-for-human-rights-in-russia>.

7 Nicolas Bouchet, *Democracy Promotion as US Foreign Policy: Bill Clinton and Democratic Enlargement*, (Routledge, 2015).

8 Angela Stent, *The Limits of Partnership: U.S.-Russian Relations in the Twenty-First Century*, (Princeton University Press, 2014)

and low profile. In the 1990s, assistance focused on economic modernization, with some support for governance, judicial reforms, corruption, and civil society.⁹ There was more diplomatic pressure on human rights issues rather than more political concerns. Like the United States, European countries mostly turned a blind eye to violations of democratic norms. As the political situation worsened, the EU became more critical, but its approach did not change radically.¹⁰ And as Russia regained economic and military strength, and thus leverage vis-à-vis Europe, it was more able to de-link relations and democracy.¹¹ This created a paradoxical situation in which some EU institutions and governments took a stronger line, for example by supporting civil society through the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights, even as the Putin regime was courted for economic, energy, and security reasons. Countries such as France, Germany, and Italy have regularly placed other interests first. On the other hand, several, including newer EU members in Central and Eastern Europe, have tried to keep democracy on the agenda. There has also tended to be a split in Brussels with the Commission and Council less interested and the Parliament more critical of Russia. European countries also tend to shun what they see as a confrontational U.S. approach to Russia over democracy. For example, there is a strong strand in German policy of building closer ties to help political change in Russia. This has often been matched at the EU level, such as in the 2010 Partnership for Modernization with Russia, which effectively does not include democracy questions.

“ Russia is the trendsetter of the “closing space” phenomenon.”

Limited democracy promotion in Russia was not just the result of waning Western interest. The authorities' many countermeasures have made it extremely difficult for foreign governments or nongovernmental organizations to support groups and individuals there. Russia is the trendsetter of the “closing space” phenomenon, which has seen governments impose ever tighter restrictions on the ability of civil society to push for political change and, crucially, to receive external support. Putin aimed from the start to drive out foreign influences on Russia's politics, especially after Color Revolutions toppled neighboring regimes, which Russia

9 Richard Youngs and Natalia Shapovalova, "EU Human Rights Policy Towards Russia", European Parliament: Directorate-General for External Policies, 2011, http://fride.org/download/EU_Human_Rights_Policy_Towards_Russia.pdf.

10 Sinikukka Saari, "European democracy promotion in Russia before and after the 'colour' revolutions", *Democratization*, 16: 4, 2009; Susan Stewart, "EU Democracy Promotion in the Eastern Neighbourhood: One Template, Multiple Approaches", *European Foreign Affairs Review*, 16: 5, 2011.

11 Sabine Fischer, "The EU and Russia: Conflicts and Potentials of a Difficult Partnership", *Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik*, 2007, http://www.swp-berlin.org/fileadmin/contents/products/research_papers/2007_RP01_fhs_ks.pdf.

saw as the result of Western support to opposition forces and civil society.¹² Laws aim to drive out “undesirable” foreign entities, especially those providing democracy assistance, and penalize groups receiving external support as “foreign agents.” The authorities have now also said that they view political protests and outside support for those involved as a national security threat and even as a form of non-military warfare to be dealt with by security forces.¹³ This raises the danger for Russian critics of the regime and outsiders supporting them.

Major U.S. institutions with a long record of democracy support in Russia have had to leave the country, stop making grants there, or change significantly how they operate. They include the Agency for International Development, the National Democratic Institute, the International Republican Institute, the MacArthur Foundation, and Open Society Foundations. European donors and nongovernmental organizations, such as the Swedish International Development Agency or the German party foundations, have so far been able to remain in Russia, while being more cautious about the kind of activities they carry out. This suggests the authorities either see them as less threatening or less confrontational. It might also be the case that the Kremlin is more interested in using the crackdown on democracy assistance as a weapon in its wider confrontation with the United States, and that it tolerates the presence of European organizations as one way to suggest transatlantic division.

New Methods and Their Limits

Given the closing space and that some of them can no longer be based in Russia, democracy promoters have adopted methods that can be labelled as “offshoring” and “onlining.” They increasingly operate out of neighboring countries, working with and through a growing expatriate community, using intermediaries and engaging with Russian partners outside of the country. For example, Freedom House’s office in Lithuania, opened in 2011 to support Belarusian activists, now also functions as a “Democracy Shelter” for Russian activists. Offshoring also takes the form of developing and making greater use of regional platforms, such as

“ Onlining helps expatriates maintain networks with activists and groups in Russia.”

the Prague Civil Society Centre established in 2015 to strengthen civil society across Eurasia and serve as a knowledge hub.¹⁴ Some donors no longer able or willing to operate in Russia fund organizations working at the regional level as a way of indirectly supporting partners there.

Onlining has seen democracy promoters making greater use of digital technology to work remotely with Russian partners as well as helping them use such tools within the country to improve their outreach. They also help partners build up resilience through training and assistance in digital security and circumvention technology. Onlining also helps expatriates maintain networks with activists and groups in Russia. The use of an online platform to unite political expatriates into a movement has been floated. Democracy promoters combine offshoring and onlining to support independent Russian media in exile, such as the Latvia-based Meduza news website. This combination can extend to developing tools to counter the messaging of the Russian state and state-aligned media, not only in Russia but in the region. Supporting independent Russian and Russian-language media, which the likes of the U.S. National Endowment for Democracy and the European Endowment for Democracy have made a priority, will rely heavily on new digital media tools.

There are several advantages to offshoring and onlining, such as not having to spend time and resources navigating bureaucratic obstacles for operating in Russia and having the freedom to do more overtly political work. They provide a necessary alternative to traditional methods of assistance that can no longer easily be used in-country. However, there may be limits to what they can achieve. While it is easier to reach more people online, the impact of the interaction with partners may be less than that of in-person contact or of a mix of online and direct contacts. Working with expatriates and intermediaries can also be costlier and more time-consuming by adding layers of complexity, and involves a loss of close ongoing contact with partners on the ground. By its very nature, offshoring might also reinforce the old tendency of focusing too much on individuals at the expense of broader movements. Though Russia’s authorities do not so far stop people from travelling abroad to take part in activities, doing so could become riskier for those who do and make many reluctant to continue.

Technology specialists are confident that the most sophisticated tools democracy promoters use and put at the disposal of partners are safe from all but the most intensive efforts by authorities to crack them. But, however safe systems are, the human factor is a risk. Many groups receiving this help are small and can lack staff with the necessary technological skills. Russia’s authorities have intelligence and technical capacities that are up to the task of

¹² Thomas Ambrosio, *Authoritarian Backlash: Russian Resistance to Democratization in the Former Soviet Union*, (Routledge, 2013).

¹³ Nicolas Bouchet, “Russia’s ‘militarization’ of colour revolutions”, Center for Security Studies, ETH Zurich January 2016, <http://e-collection.library.ethz.ch/eserv/eth:49430/eth-49430-01.pdf>.

¹⁴ The center is supported by, among others, the Czech, Swedish and U.S. governments as well as the C. S. Mott Foundation and the Oak Foundation.

monitoring those they suspect of taking part in onlining efforts. One organization reports that its Russian partners are now reluctant to participate in digital-security training in-country. If or when the regime cracks down on recipients of onlining assistance to the extent that it has on those of in-country efforts, democracy promoters may need to revisit older, more covert methods of providing support to partners while adapting them to the digital era. And, while digital technology may have made it impossible to shut off completely the flow of independent information into Russia, it has also enabled the authorities to flood the information space with pro-regime content, which may be more effective in ensuring that unwanted messages do not reach the population by drowning them.

Working through Russian expatriates is not a perfect solution either. Over time many will integrate more in host countries and lose interest in working for change in Russia. It is also not sure that those who persist will be welcome back as political actors by Russian society if an opening comes after many years. Many of them are middle-class citizens who left after the regime crack-down following the 2011-12 protests. They form a relatively small group that hopes to go back to Russia and strives to maintain networks there.¹⁵ Their connections with society are bound to weaken as time passes, and more so if the regime increases its insulation tactics to target directly their activities. The precedents of Cuba and Iran, whose exiles are often seen as foreign and disconnected from society, are not encouraging. In contrast, the case of Tunisia's former exiles is more encouraging. Democracy support could therefore target more explicitly keeping expatriates connected to Russian society to minimize the risk of them being rejected later as foreign, though this may be inevitable if the strength of nationalism in the country persists. An alternative approach would be to focus on the broader and longer-established Russian-speaking diaspora as potential transmitters of democratic values into the country. Finally, there may be a "perverse" risk that supporting expatriates could accentuate the flight of Russia's middle-class citizens, which the authorities may not mind and could increase a brain drain that is corrosive to democratization. Overall, democracy promoters may need to consider that working through expatriates, while necessary due to the lack of alternatives, could have a limited shelf life.

A Long-term Lifeline

As well as the above changes in tactics, those providing democracy support to Russians are also undergoing a more strategic shift

with regard to the timeframe for their efforts to pay off. They do not anticipate dramatic progress soon, but aim instead to ensure the country's democratic actors have a long-term lifeline. This is done through bilateral programs and new collective efforts such as the Lifeline Embattled CSO Assistance Fund, a consortium providing emergency assistance, advocacy grants, and resilience grants.¹⁶ Many actors in this field argue that this approach is the best possible in the current context and hope that long-term investment in the survival of democratic civil society could pay off whenever there is a breakthrough. (In a more radical take, Mikhail Khodorkovsky's Open Russia foundation aims to build a "civil society in exile" that would be the basis for a future leadership for Russian society.)¹⁷ For some, the difficulty in predicting when a breakthrough might happen is precisely why it is important to provide a lifeline through difficult times.

“ One obstacle to success of the lifeline approach in Russia is short funding cycles.”

Much democracy assistance is still reactive to unexpected crises with organizations often rushing into the breach to operate in a country after a crisis, as seen in the Arab Spring. But the impact is likely to be limited if they have not engaged there previously. Thus, a long-term approach is sensible to prepare the ground for when there might be a breakthrough in Russia. In Ukraine, donors supported democratic actors through years of disappointments and consequent "Ukraine fatigue." This support, even if not large, helped a reformist constituency survive, which eventually played an important role following the Euromaidan. That is why democracy promoters want to keep supporting potential change agents in Russian political life even if the prospects for progress are not encouraging in the short term.

Some major donors debate, however, whether they should invest their limited resources in Russia, where it is hard to show success during a standard funding cycle and where the long-term payoff is uncertain. They express doubt that providing a lifeline in Russia, though important, is justified when funds could be used in more promising countries in the region where it is also easier to work, especially Ukraine. Some of them also argue that helping reforms succeed in Ukraine will have more impact on Russia than funding highly curtailed activities there. Nonetheless, many still see Russia as the vital strategic country for democratization prospects in the region. But they still need to convince their govern-

¹⁵ Marie Mendras, "Russian Elites Are Worried: The Unpredictability of Putinism", Transatlantic Academy, 2016, http://www.transatlanticacademy.org/sites/default/files/publications/Mendras_RussianElites_Jun16_web_0.pdf.

¹⁶ "Lifeline: Assistance Fund for Embattled Civil Society Organizations", <https://freedomhouse.org/program/lifeline>.

¹⁷ Masha Gessen, "The Putin Nemesis Plotting a Post-Putin Russia", Vanity Fair, 11 July 2016, <http://www.vanityfair.com/news/2016/07/mikhail-khodorkovsky-putin-russia>.

ments, within which this is not a widely shared view and “Russia fatigue” could become a problem.

One obvious obstacle to the success of the lifeline approach in Russia is short funding cycles. Implementers usually receive funds from governments and foundations for two to three years (and sometimes less), making it difficult to plan and sustain long-term strategies. Some funding has been even shorter. For example, one nongovernmental organization reports receiving funding of one or one-and-a-half year for Russia, compared to four to five years for Ukraine. Ukraine may also not be a wholly appropriate precedent since it was not as repressive as Russia is today, with more independent civil society and media. What is more, if it focuses on too narrow a range of individuals and organizations, the lifeline approach might even result in the creation of a “democratic ghetto” that is irrelevant to society at large, as seen in Belarus. There would be no guarantee that these could play a major role in the event of a breakthrough.

Wider Civil Society

Some democracy promoters have moved toward more broadly defined civil society support in Russia, arguing that the best way to empower its citizens is to focus less on democracy and human rights and more on economic and social issues, such as corruption. Since Putin and the regime appear to enjoy some popular support, the lifeline strategy might have more impact by broadening the range of issues involved, including by supplementing the longer-term efforts of some donors to encourage the gradual build-up of societal foundations of democracy in Russia before it is possible to engage with political matters. This would enable democracy promoters to engage with less political, non-traditional partners and to encourage wider movements for progress on specific socioeconomic issues.

While it has merit in promoting democratization, this move does not guarantee overcoming the closing-space problem in Russia. New issues and types of support may not make it easier to help partners since the authorities will still see this as foreign interference. Diversifying to less political partners and issues will make little difference to a regime that increasingly sees foreign involvement in any issue as undermining the state, as shown by its cracking down on some activities in the education and business spheres. Donors may see it as less political, but for the authorities any involvement by democracy-promoting entities automatically politicizes any issue.

The impact of a broader civil society approach to democracy promotion in Russia could also be limited by a further factor. Donors and implementers who have worked in certain ways with

certain partners for years sometimes lack the organizational and mindset flexibility to transition to entirely new models and partners, or the ability to go beyond the traditional donor-grantee relationship, for example over the financial oversight that is needed to exert or a fully joint designing of strategies and programs.

As a final consideration, civil society support risks being defined so broadly in terms of issues and partners that its democracy dimension is diluted until it becomes mostly irrelevant to political change. This would make it a substitute to democracy promotion rather than a part of it. Engagement with any civic actors might be rationalized as supporting democracy, allowing government or private institutions to claim to do so in Russia while shying away from harder direct ways of doing so. That is why some democracy promoters still insist that, however difficult in the current Russian context, more directly political activities, such party development, electoral assistance, or supporting dissidents, remains vital to their mission.

“**Donors lack the organizational flexibility to transition to new models and partners.”**

Confront the Difficult Question

Trying to ensure the survival of a democratically-inclined segment of Russian society that can gradually campaign for change, or play a positive role in the aftermath of any crisis that shakes or even topples the system, can complement a European and U.S. strategy to contain and push back against Russia’s confrontational foreign policy. The precautionary argument that doing so would infuriate and provoke the Putin regime holds less weight when the latter already opted for confrontation when there were only small efforts at providing democracy assistance to Russians.

It is important that Europe and the United States confront the difficult question of democracy in Russia — not with rosy expectations but with a realistic mindset recognizing the limits of and timeframe for what can be achieved. The new methods that democracy promoters have adopted in response to the drastic curtailing of their ability to operate in the country are worthy efforts that should be supported further by state and private funding institutions, allowing for them to be refined and built upon where possible. This is especially true bearing in mind that funding them more fully would represent a very small investment, especially within governments’ overall aid budgets. That these new methods have drawbacks and do not provide silver bullets for encouraging democratization in Russia is not in itself a problem because there

are no silver bullets in democracy promotion, and even less so in such extreme “closing space” countries. Rather there is a pattern of action and reaction in which the appearance of success with one type of support brings about a crackdown, forcing democracy promoters to constantly adjust their focus. What matters more is consistent engagement over the long-term and flexibility in methods. Therefore, the shift to a longer timeframe and to a wider civil society perspective is a positive development that deserves further support from U.S. and EU donors, as long as this does not mean the sacrifice of the older focus on more directly political areas of assistance, however difficult it is now to pursue the latter in Russia.

Promoting democracy in Russia today looks to be an intractable issue, and the record of Europe and the United States in this regard is not impressive. Given the challenge of dealing with the regime’s confrontational foreign policy and its campaign to stamp out of any form of democracy promotion, the path of least resistance for Western policymakers would be to decide that there is so little they can do to help progress that it is not worth trying. Yet history shows, including in Russia, that undemocratic systems that appear immutable can encounter potentially fatal turbulences unexpectedly. Even with the caveats noted above, the ongoing low-key lifeline efforts to support democratic actors in Russia are worth persevering with and building on. This should not be in hope of fostering major change in the short or medium term, as democracy promoters acknowledge, but with a perspective that combines long-term evolution and contingency in case of a crisis.

When the communist regime and the Soviet Union collapsed, there were political actors in Russia who, for all their faults, steered events in a direction that was relatively democratic and mostly peaceful. Had they not been present or been too weak to play this role, the hyper-nationalist, reactionary, and autocratic alternatives would have been far worse — for Russia, the region, and the West. It is in the interest of Europe and the United States to invest in the survival of such democratic actors in Russia, if they do not want to be faced with the worse alternatives in the event of a systemic crisis or collapse.

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