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**The EU should be the leader
of democracy promotion in Russia**

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The EU should be the leader of democracy promotion in Russia

Jarosław Ćwiek-Karpowicz

- *The attitude of Russians towards democracy is ambivalent. On one hand, it is defined by negative connotations associated with the beginning of the systemic transformation. On the other hand, Russians enviously watch how the countries of Central and Eastern Europe that have chosen democratisation, now begin to achieve political and economic success. In this way, democracy has also positive connotations of order and stable prosperity.*
- *The European Union is the only actor on the international scene that has an opportunity to effectively support democratic processes in Russia.*
- *The EU should not limit its activities to projects examining the observance of democratic procedures in Russia. Long-term activities aimed at gradual change of the Russian mindset are also needed.*
- *The EU should broaden the existing range of tools as well as create new instruments to support democracy in Russia. Besides the establishment of the European Foundation for Democracy, the efforts should be concentrated on further reform of the European Initiative for Democracy and Human Rights. It is necessary to considerably decentralise this initiative as well as to effectively employ the experience of American and German institutions promoting democracy.*

The recent G-8 summit in St. Petersburg reaffirmed the hitherto known pattern – the West is not going to react to Russia's divergence from democracy. Stable economic and political relations are more important for Western countries. President Vladimir Putin appears to them as a serious partner and

a guarantor of international order. Leaders of the richest countries seem not to share the viewpoint presented by Natan Sharansky. According to the author of the popular in Washington bestseller, *The Case for Democracy: The Power of Freedom to Overcome Tyranny and Terror*, it is better to be a neighbo-

ur of a democracy that hates us than a dictator that appears to be our ally. The chances are slim that a democratic country will wage a war against us, whereas a dictator can easily turn us into an enemy, even if just to uphold his power.

Sooner or later, a non-democratic Russia can become if not a threat than an inconvenient opponent for the international community. The issue of successful democratisation of this country is being broadly discussed in American and European poli-

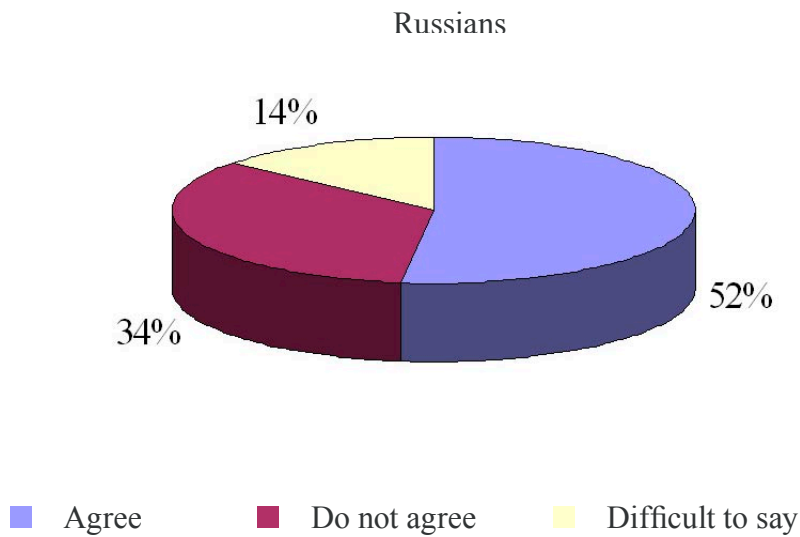
tical circles. The task is exceptionally difficult and long-term. How to make it possible for a real and efficient system of democratic governance to emerge in a country so used to authoritative rule? How to convince the society that prosperity derived from trade in energy resources is short-termed, and that successful modernisation of the country is not possible without deep social reforms: building civil society, strengthening rule of law, etc?

Russians' attitude towards democracy

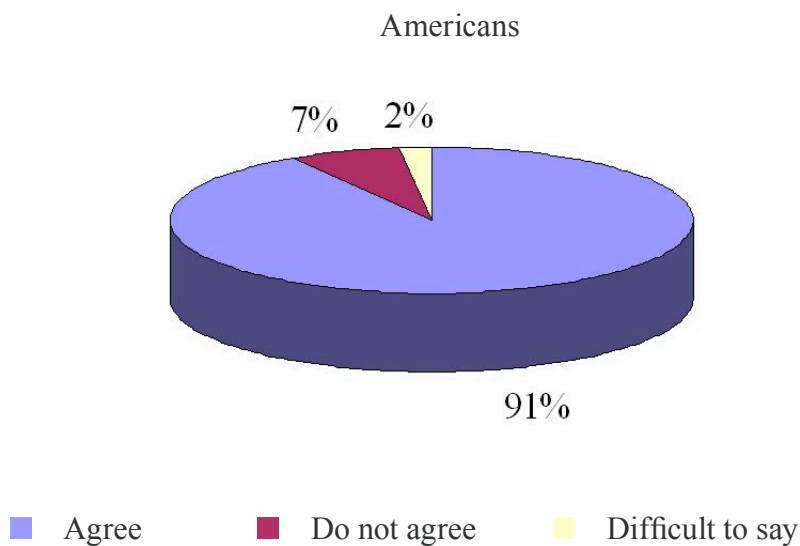
For the society and the political elites in Russia, it is far from obvious that democracy means a system of representative government based on the rule of law and tripartite division of power; that it implies the observance of basic human rights, such as freedom of expression, freedom of association and assembly, and protection against discrimination, etc. There is no clear definition of democracy in the social perception of Russians. Negative connotations with difficult experience of the nineties, criminal privatisation, the financial crisis of August 1998, lack of economic stability, widespread corruption and crime (also among the highest ranks), clientelism and pursuit of self-interest are prevalent. Moreover, in the Russian mind, democracy is associated with Russia's loss of its superpower status on the international arena. In addition to that, democracy is perceived as a tool enabling western countries to meddle in internal affairs of Russia and its immediate neighbourhood. This leads to a situation where Russians do not consider this form of government to be

the most opportunate, and only just over half of the society believe that this is the best form of political regime (see picture 1). The connotations of democracy with the crisis of the state and declining position of their country are all too strong among Russians. This situation is very different from the US, where democracy is perceived to be one of the conditions not only for successful private lives, but also for the prosperous development of their state.

Picture 1. Do you agree with the statement that democracy is the best form of government?



Source: Levada Centre, n=1600, 9-14 June 2006, phone survey



Source: Knowledge Networks, n=1059, 27 June – 2 July 2006, internet survey.

The majority of Russians do not have a clear opinion whether their state is already a democratic one or not. According to the research by the Public Opinion Foundation from March 2005, about one in three Russians is convinced that Russia is a democracy, a similar number of people do not agree with this statement, and the rest do not have an opinion.

Due to this situation, the incumbent Russian authorities find it easier to convince the society that Russia is “a different kind of democracy”, that deviations from democratic standards are something understandable and can be justified by the tradition of social relations, difficult history, multi-ethnic state, huge territory, etc. Such recent products of PR spe-

cialists as “sovereign democracy” or “controlled democracy” emphasise the incompatibility of Russian political situation with the requirements of the western democracy model and justify autocratic practices of the incumbent authorities. The new terms remind one of a joke well-known during the communist times: the difference between a democracy and a people’s democracy is exactly the same as between a chair and an electric chair.

Moreover, it is still very difficult for Russians to reconcile themselves to their hard history. The feeling of doing harm to themselves as well as other nations as a result of the communist regime is levelled by the emphasis on the role of the Soviet Union in the saving of the world from fascism during WWII. Russians find it difficult to admit that for ages they had been deprived of any rights, and their lives had been utterly dependant on their ruler. And yet, the paradox of the “Russian soul” means that even though it got used to the absolute position of the ruler, it still values freedom and independence. In this sense, the word “democracy” does not always have negative connotations for Russians;

it can also be associated with a certain scope of freedom and opportunity to gain prosperity. These positive connotations of “democracy” are a chance not to be wasted for the promoters of democracy.

On the other hand, too instrumental an approach towards democracy can prove dangerous. The establishment of stability and order could be mistaken for the introduction of democracy. As a result, when asked about “the most democratic period in the history of Russia”, Russian people demonstrate a rather surprising attitude (see table 1). As few as 9% of Russian people consider the presidency of Boris Yeltsin to be the period of democratic regime in Russia. In a similar way, only one in ten Russians see Gorbachev’s perestroika as a period of democratisation of Russia. The largest number of people associate democratisation of their country with the rule of Vladimir Putin and Leonid Brezhnev, (29% and 14% respectively). In other words, democratisation is associated with the periods of economic growth and relative prosperity, which - in this case - does not have much to do with democracy.

Table 1. Under the rule of which of the below mentioned leaders was Russia most democratic?

Name and surname of the leader after 1945	Number of answers
Yosif Stalin	2
Nikita Khrushchov	2
Leonid Brezhnev	14
Yuri Andropov	5
Mikhail Gorbachev	11
Boris Yeltsin	9
Vladimir Putin	29
Difficult to say	28

Source: Public Opinion Foundation (FOM), n=1500, 26-27 March 2005

All in all, Russians value democracy and are attached to it in some way, despite the lack of much experience and constant problems with this form of government. For more than half (61%) of Russians it is important that Russia is trying to be a democratic state, and only one in five (21%) persons states that it is not important for them. Yet it remains contentious how to achieve these democratic ideals. Russians still remember the inglorious period of rule by “democrats” in the nineties, unsuccessful socio-economic reforms and general chaos during Boris Yeltsin’s presidency. For this reasons only a small number of people believe that democratic principles are best reflected via political activity of Russian “democrats” grouped around such parties as Yabloko (13%), the Democratic Party of Russia (13%), the Union of Rights Forces (8%) or Our Choice (8%). The majority of people see the opportunity for the development of democracy in the activity of the pro-presidential party United Russia (23%), as well as the Liberal-Democratic Par-

ty of Russia (LDPR) led by Vladimir Zhirinovskiy (20%).¹ The latter is commonly considered to be an extreme nationalist and populist party. Apart from the name, it does not have much in common with “democracy” or “liberalism”. However, both parties are unmistakably regarded as parties aiming to “introduce order” in the country.

Despite the bad experience of the nineties, real establishment of democracy is connected with introducing order and prosperity of the state and society. With a pinch of envy Russians watch the former Eastern bloc countries, which - after becoming members of the European Union - experience considerable economic development. Promoters of democracy should pay special attention to the emerging longing after democracy – the system that brought relative prosperity to different nations in different times and the one that Russia has never really experienced. This is a chance too easy to waste.

Democracy Promotion as an Instrument of Foreign Influence

Apart from internal experiences and conditionings, the international context has an unusually strong influence on the perception of democracy in Russia. Not only the elites, but also common citizens find it difficult to get rid of colonial categories in the perception of international relations. Thus, “the sphere of influence” remains a very important and lively concept often employed by Russians to describe relations with other states. Contemporary world, just as ages ago, is divided into spheres, for which super-

powers have to fight. It is only the methods that can change: from military and political to economic. The collapse of the Soviet Union is also considered as the loss of control over a considerable territory as well as the limitation of the sphere of Russian influence upon the “near abroad” – the territory of the Commonwealth of Independent States. Today Russia is trying to recapture this influence using its rich natural resources. It is becoming present - mainly economically, but also politically - in regions that, in Russia’s point of view, stand up to Ameri-

can and Western European influences, for example, Venezuela or Iran.

Thus, the activity of the transatlantic community aimed at supporting and promoting democracy in the world is regarded by Russians as a hidden way of advancing mainly American geopolitical interests based on widening of their sphere of influence. This explains the popularity in Russia of such books as “The Grand Chessboard. American Primary and Its Geostrategic Imperatives” by Zbigniew Brzezinski (New York, 1997), and “Projekt Yevrazya” (The Eurasia Project) by Aleksandr Du-

gin (Moscow, 2004). Both books focus on the same issue, the implementation of strategic goals through the employment of cultural and civilisational influences. According to this line of thought, since democracy is the main pillar of the Western civilisation, its promotion serves the strategic goals of the US and some Western European states.

Sociological research also demonstrates the prevalence among Russians of negative attitudes towards democracy promotion by the US (see Table 2).

Table 2. What is your attitude to the fact that the US allocate funds for the promotion of democracy in Russia?

	Total	Age				
		18-24	25-34	35-44	45-59	60 and more
Positive	34%	46%	32%	35%	33%	25%
Negative	51%	42%	50%	51%	53%	56%
Difficult to say	15%	12%	17%	14%	14%	18%

Source: WCIOM, 3-4 December 2005, n=1594.

The majority of Russians (51%) do not want the US to spend money on the promotion of democracy in Russia. A more positive attitude prevails only among young people. The infamous campaign accompanying passing of the law limiting the independence of Russian non-governmental organisations demonstrated examples of Russia-based

NGOs being used by Western intelligence. Even if no one believes in the involvement of such organisations as the Helsinki Committee or Memorial in intelligence activity of foreign states, Kremlin PR specialists still try to convince Russian public opinion of this thesis.

Not only the United States or Great Britain can be accused of pursuing private interests under the curtain of democracy promotion. Russian public opinion can be easily led to believe that the activity of e.g. the “Eastern Foundation”, a recent initiative of the President of Poland, is nothing else than an attempt to regain Polish influence over today’s territories of Ukraine and Belarus. According to Kremlin experts, the activity of the Foundation in the territory of the former Soviet Union, instead of sharing its experience gained during successful systemic transformation and democratisation of public life, is aimed at weakening Russia’s position in this region.

To sum up, supporting democracy in Russia is an exceptionally difficult task that can be received with hostility and lack of understanding by the majority of population. The question is then, how to support Russians’ aspirations towards democratisation of their country from the outside, taking into account how easy it is to become a target of Kremlin propaganda that strengthens centralisation and authoritarianism of the incumbents? How not to let Russians lose the emerging feeling that democracy does not have to mean chaos and corruption, but – if well tended to - can bring stable improvement of their personal situations as well as prosperity for the whole state?

Promotion of Democracy in Russia by the European Union

The European Union is regarded very positively by the Russian society and political elites. President of Russian Federation Vladimir Putin, in his recent letter to the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation, called the EU the most important partner of Russia. The CIS members-states, until recently the most important allies of Russia, as well as other actors of the international stage were mentioned only after the EU. President focused on the “development of dialogue between Russia and the EU”, which would ensure favourable conditions for economic exchange for both parties. Today, more than half of Russian foreign trade exchange is with the EU.

However, present cooperation with the EU falls into the traditional model of relations between Russia and Europe. Just as it used to be during the ti-

mes of Peter the Great, today Russia is interested in fast modernisation of the state: mainly in the spheres of modern administration, management of means of production, new technologies, yet with the exception of the social-political sphere. It seems that Russia would like to have a special kind of exchange: to get new technologies and modern ways of management in exchange for stable supplies of energy resources. It is also ready to support the EU on the international arena, in possible disputes with the US. A first instant of this was Russian support for German and French opposition to military intervention in Iraq in 2003.

From the very beginning Russia has been underestimating the European Union and its political power. Initially the EU was considered as an econo-

mic backing of the NATO, later on – as a basis for future German expansionism.² Little attention was given to the capabilities of the EU officials who represent community interest and not individual nation-states' interests. Russian diplomacy still believes in the effectiveness of bilateral politics and inherent impotence of supra-national organisations. For this reason, both Boris Yeltsin and Vladimir Putin preferred to nurture contacts with leaders of individual member-states of the EU rather than with leaders of the EU institutions.

The attitude that underestimates the political importance and power of the EU, but highly values its economical and technological potential, can be effectively used in promotion of democracy. It is more difficult for Russian authorities to accuse the EU than the United States or a particular Western European state of having "vested interests". The EU, as a voluntary organisation, supports the development of its all member-states as well as its neighbourhood. The positive influence of the EU on its neighbours has been known for a long time. In fact, some neighbouring countries have initiated democratisation processes with the view to joining the EU one day.

Whether Russia has a chance to become an EU member or not, the influence of the EU is already considerable and can still increase. Russia has to reckon with the EU institutions due to the existing agreements. The signed in 1994 *Partnership and Cooperation Agreement*, regulating trade exchange between Russia and the EU, expires in November 2007. The text of the new agreement is not known yet, the parties start negotiations in a couple of months. Provided the EU negotiators' consistent attitude, the final document may contain important clauses that would make cooperation and financial

assistance for Russia subject to respecting and supporting democratic standards: the rule of law, freedom of expression, political pluralism, human rights, civic activity of the society, civil control over the army, etc. The Russian authorities have been showing and will show more respect for the EU political declarations and positions than towards activities of any other organisation promoting democracy, such as the Council of Europe or OSCE. In a crisis situation, the Kremlin will find it easier to close American or German foundation supporting democracy, human rights, rule of law in Russia, than the European Commission Representation Office in Moscow.

The EU support for Russia as well as for the whole post-Soviet area consists mainly of the so-called technical assistance carried out from 1991 through the TACIS programme (*Technical Assistance for the Commonwealth of Independent States*). It covers institutional, legal, and administrative reforms; counteracting negative effects of transformation, development of infrastructure; nuclear safety; promotion of environmental protection; development of rural economy. From the beginning of the programme up to now Russia has received 2 billion euros from TACIS. The annual amount ranges between 80 and 160 million euros.

The organisation that is responsible for the promotion of democracy by the EU is the recently reformed *European Initiative for Democracy and Human Rights*. The scope of its activity covers not only the territory of the former USSR, but also Western Balkans, Middle East, Asia, Africa and Latin America. The EIDHR answers to the specially established Human Rights and Democracy Committee. The Committee meets four times a year, and is composed of representatives of all EU member-sta-

tes. Its meetings are chaired by a representative of the Directorate General for External Relations. The total budget of the EIDHR for 2006 is 120 million euros, 1.5 million of which is allocated for micro-project concerning Russia.

The comparison between the amounts of assistance from the TACIS programme and the EIDHR programme leads us to a simple conclusion that the EU *de facto* is not interested in Russia's becoming a democratic country, but rather a strong and stable

country with market economy. Moreover, the amount of the EIDHR funds allocated for micro-projects in Russia is not considerably different from that spent on much smaller states, such as Georgia or Kazakhstan (see table 3). This means that promotion of democracy is not under special consideration of the EU, even if the state of democracy in other countries in the region, to a large extent, is dependant on the state of democracy in Russia.

Table 3. The EIDHR funds allocated for micro-projects in 2005 and 2006 (thousand euros)

Country	Allocated funds	
	2005	2006
Armenia	800	765
Belarus	420	400
Georgia	1025	950
Kazakhstan	1135	1030
Kirgizstan	570	550
Russia	1555	1415
Tadzhikistan	570	550
Ukraine	1025	950

Source: (http://ec.europa.eu/comm/europeaid/projects/eidhr/pdf/eidhr_annual_work_programme_2006_annex_ii_en.pdf).

Many politicians, independent experts and NGO representatives have emphasised that the EU should be more active in the promotion of democracy. Some of them, such as German politician Marcus Meckel, suggest the establishment of the European Foundation for Democracy³. Others postulate the creation of a similar foundation under the aegis of the European Parliament. Such German political foundations as Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, Friedrich-

Ebert-Stiftung, Heinrich-Boell-Stiftung – which apart from consolidating democratic system in Germany are support democracy in the world – could serve as an example.⁴ These initiatives deserve attention since they follow the general trend of making the EU more committed to and more effective in the promotion of democracy in the world.

European public opinion also has a positive attitude towards the issues of democracy promotion.

The *Transatlantic Trends* study conducted by the German Marshall Fund of the United States have shown that residents of the EU member-states support promotion of democracy more readily than, for example, Americans, whose enthusiasm for the idea of democracy promotion depends on the evaluation of the effects of the Bush administration actions in Iraq.⁵

The experience of the previously mentioned German foundations and their American institutions should serve as an example. First of all, it is important to eliminate bureaucratic practices to the fullest possible extent. Democracy promotion activities should be maximally decentralised and conducted by people who work “in the field”, and who know the specificity of a given country. Secondly, it is necessary to maximally simplify and de-bureaucratise the procedures of granting funds and financial reporting, so as to take into consideration difficult conditions of beneficiaries from countries where treasure and banking systems are largely controlled by political authorities.

It is also vital to continue the reform of the instruments of democracy promotion in Russian applied by the EU today. Not only should the EU increase the funds allocated for this goal, but also administer them effectively. The majority of the EIDHR funds are still centrally administered by the corresponding institutions of the European Commission. These funds are mainly spent on the so-called macro-projects. The procedures of granting funds are very complicated. The period between submitting an application, granting funds and signing the contract can exceed half a year; money transfers take additional time. This time is very important for Russian organisations. Fortunately, Brussels decided to make the application procedures more efficient and decentralise the programme, transferring some power of discretion to its representations abroad (yet, this concerns only micro-projects). It is worth following this path.

Conclusions and Recommendations

1. The European Union has the biggest potential in the area of democracy promotion in Russia, in comparison to both international organisations and individual states. The EU is attractive for Russia as a civilisational choice, even without membership prospects. It is possible that Russian elites will choose a Western European model of democracy in the future. Yet, it is important to do everything to make this task easier for them.
2. Democratisation of Russia means not only the elimination of all kinds of abuses of power and electoral frauds, but also a long-term change of the Russian mindset. Thus, it is necessary to support the activity of non-governmental organisations, self-government, minority rights, freedom of expression, etc. The EU should approach these tasks in a very serious way.
3. It is also important to support existing instruments of democracy promotion and not just fo-

cus on creating new instruments. The reform of the Initiative for Democracy and Human Rights in order to make it more efficient should be continued. Supporting democracy in Russian should be a priority task for the Committee for Human Rights and Democracy, which defines the directions of the EIDHR's activity. For this purpose, a broad coalition of the representatives of member-states sitting in the Committee should be organised. It is also important to make the External Relations Directorate General more sensitive towards the situation in Russia.

4. European NGOs and individual member-states should initiate a broad campaign aimed at a considerable increase of the funds allocated for the EIDHR. In addition that that, funds allocated for Russia should be relatively bigger than those for other countries in the region.
5. It is vital to decentralise the EIDHR by ensuring a greater role for the European Commission Representation Office in Moscow in defining the Initiative's agenda in Russia. Moreover, the Representation should not limit its activity to the capital, but be active also in the regions. The EIDHR representatives should have their offices also outside Moscow.
6. The European Commission Representation Office in Moscow should intensify its activity, increasing the number of staff, as well as the amount of funds. The EIDHR officials at the European Commission Representation Office in Moscow should have prior experience in democracy promotion. It is not enough for them to be EU officials who deal with many other issues at the same time.
7. The European Commission Representation Office should become an active centre coordina-

ting and supporting other institutions acting in support of democracy in Russia.

Endnotes

¹ Phone survey conducted on 24-25 December 2005 r. by the Public Opinion Foundation (FOM) on a representative sample of 1500 persons – citizens of the Russian Federation. See <http://bd.english.fom.ru/report/cat/az/D/democracy/etb055207>

² See Pekka Sutela, *Russia and Europe: Some Economic Aspects*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Moscow 2003; Yuri Borko, *Ot jevropeyskoy idei – k yedinoy Yevropie*, Moscow 2003.

³ See Markus Meckel, "A European Foundation for Democracy", in *Prospects for Democracy in Belarus*, Joerg Forbig, David R. Marples, Pavol Demes (eds.), The German Marshall Fund of the United States, 2006, (<http://www.gmfus.org/doc/Belarus%20book%20final.pdf>).

⁴ See Jacek Kucharczyk, *Assisting Democratic Transition in Belarus: Lessons from Pre-1989 Poland*, w: *Prospects for Democracy in Belarus*, op. cit.

⁵ See (<http://www.transatlantictrends.org/doc/TTToplineData2005.pdf>).

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