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## **Listen To the Russians**

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This past spring, in the May/June issue of *Foreign Affairs*, Richard Pipes of Harvard University drew on public opinion data to argue that Russians don't want democracy. His unstated implication was that efforts to promote democracy in Russia were a waste of time and money. Before the last Group of Eight meeting, Russian President Vladimir Putin dismissed democracy assistance with a different rationale. Russians already have democracy, he said; foreign "assistance" just serves foreign interests. Serge Schmemmann of the *New York Times*, stricken by the murder of Moscow-based journalist

Paul Klebnikov, wrote: "[W]hen power tramples on institutions that are at the heart of a free society, we begin to wonder whether we can [help], or whether we should."

We can, we should, and we must. The real issue is: How?

We agree with Pipes that we ought to listen to the Russians. And if we do so, using representative survey data, what we hear is that they are deeply divided in their attitudes toward democracy. In 2002 and 2003 we asked more than 10,000 survey respondents "Which statement do you agree with most? (1)

Democracy is always preferable; (2) Authoritarian government is sometimes preferable to democracy; or (3) The form of government does not matter to people like me." In both years 34 to 36 percent of the respondents said they would prefer authoritarian rule some of the time, 30 to 31 percent preferred democracy always and the rest -- 33 to 36 percent - either said it doesn't matter or declined to answer.

Other survey responses confirm this division into three camps of roughly equal size, one favoring authoritarian government, one democracy and one that cannot decide. While roughly 39 percent say it would be good if the government controlled the content of all news reports, 43 percent say it would be bad. And 80 percent say it would be bad if the government shut down a television program for criticizing its policies. Or consider that 26 percent say they would "definitely" or "probably" vote for Stalin if he were running for president, while 19 percent say "probably not." These figures are troubling, but 40

percent would definitely not vote for Stalin, and 44 percent would vote to elect Andrei Sakharov to the parliament.

Of course, we should be worried that as many as one in three Russians support authoritarianism. The authoritarian camp presumably approves the shrinking of public space and democratic freedoms that Putin has relentlessly pursued. But our data contradict Pipes's blanket claim that Russians have "rejected rights" in favor of authoritarianism. Precisely because the Russian public is divided, we should all strive to bolster the democratic camp and to persuade those who are undecided.

Our collaboration with dozens of human rights activists in the regions of Russia during the past two years convinced us that foreign assistance can make a difference. One form of support has particular potential to strengthen civil society: funding for social marketing -- the "selling" of certain ideas about how a society should function -- and public awareness campaigns. Social activists around the world use these tools to change and shape attitudes, knowledge, policies and behavior through tactics including education, persuasion and shaming. Surveys on how the public thinks about issues such as police abuse, crises in the military, the war in Chechnya and the collapse of health care provide activists with the information they need to craft messages and communicate with the people they are trying to reach. Public awareness campaigns guide nongovernmental organizations toward local constituencies.

We have seen this in action. Using our data, human rights activists in Ryazan, a small city a few hours' drive from Moscow, recently mounted a campaign on Chechnya that produced 1,700 signed letters to federal authorities requesting information on the war's costs. Their compelling posters drew public attention and local media coverage. Though small in scale, the success of this campaign shows the potential of social marketing as a tool for engaging the public.

Russia's democratic camp is too large to be dismissed and too small for complacency. Western states and private foundations must increase their support for democracy and human rights in Russia. They should start by funding social marketing efforts as a tool for building the capacity of NGOs.

Too often, Western policymakers have bought Putin's line and acted as if democracy were established in Russia. That may explain the insufficient funding of democracy work in recent years. This has bolstered the forces in Russia that would eliminate whatever rights remain, and has increased risks to those who favor democracy. The Russian public is still up for grabs. Now more than ever, the actions of Western governments and foundations will help decide which camp will complete the unfinished business of Russia's transition.