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Exploring democracy in the Russian Federation: political regime, public opinion and international assistance

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Abstract

This article discusses three questions: what is the purpose of 'democratic' institutions and practices in Russia's authoritarian political system; how do these institutions and practices resonate with Russian public opinion; and how do they relate to the international democracy-promotion effort in the country? Democratic institutions have more than a façade, a legitimizing role to play under authoritarianism. They are relevant to the actual functioning of the regime. State-society relations in Russia should not be understood in exclusively dichotomous terms. This would underestimate the measure of popular legitimacy of the incumbent regime in Russia, as it misinterprets popular perceptions of political democracy. Russians deplore their lack of influence over what happens in their own country; they are strongly dissatisfied with their human rights situation, but they do not translate this into a widely shared commitment to civil

liberties. Judging from regime features and popular opinion in Russia, the poor record of international democracy assistance in Russia may not come as a surprise. Compared with 'traditional' democracy assistance, rule of law support corresponds more closely with the (limited) capabilities of external actors, with the priorities of the Russian citizens as well as with the self-declared ambitions and international commitments of the Russian leadership.

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Additional information

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