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A STUDY OF POLITICAL PARTY ASSISTANCE IN EASTERN EUROPE AND EURASIA

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

JUNE 2007

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Under a joint project of the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) and the U.S. State Department (EUR/ACE), Democracy International (DI) conducted a comprehensive study of efforts to assist political party development in Eastern Europe and Eurasia. USAID's Europe and Eurasia Bureau and the State Department commissioned this study as part of an effort to increase the effectiveness and impact of political party development programs in environments constrained by U.S. Government assistance budgets, donor fatigue, and political and structural developments within recipient countries. The purpose of this study is to suggest more effective approaches to political party development based on an examination of constraints and opportunities in the E&E region and current best practices.

Using a comparative research design, Democracy International, USAID and the State Department selected cases to shed light on various approaches to political party assistance (PPA) in different contexts. Before beginning field research, DI prepared an extensive review of both the academic and applied literatures on political party assistance and developed selection criteria for the choice of case studies. Between September and December 2006, DI conducted interviews and focus groups in four case-study countries: Serbia, Romania, Georgia and Kyrgyzstan.

Party assistance strategies can be grouped into three core areas: (1) enhancing the electoral competitiveness of parties, including training in campaign strategy and tactics for parties and candidates, (2) party building, organizational development and internal democracy, and (3) aiding parties in legislatures and governance. The party institutes have conducted election-assistance programs in most countries in Europe and Eurasia, but these programs remain particularly active in Eurasia. Also common throughout the region are party building and organizational development programs, including constituency development, grassroots campaigns, membership expansion, leadership training, policy development, and efforts targeting women, youth and minorities. Legislative programs have been relatively common in targeted countries in Europe but less so in Eurasia; increasing attention to the role of parties in governance would be welcome, particularly at later stages of democratic transitions.

Building on a review of the comparative politics and applied literatures on party assistance, including assessments, evaluations and studies of party assistance of donors and implementers in transition countries, we consider the categories of *structure*, *strategy* and *agency* as ways to conceptualize and identify potential hypotheses for explaining variations in party assistance outcomes.

STRUCTURE/POLITICAL ENVIRONMENT

Variations in structure or political environment within which party assistance occurs can influence the degree of success of political party assistance strategies. Structural factors such as a country's "neighborhood" or geography, political legacy, degree of economic development and extent of common identity within its domestic population can either impede or support efforts at political party assistance. In this study, we pay particular

attention to the role of the political environment or stage of a democratic transition. However, structure does not automatically determine assistance success or failure.

Despite a shared communist past, Romania, Serbia, Georgia and Kyrgyzstan each face markedly different structural constraints. As such, while political party assistance can play a positive role in each of these countries, the nature of this assistance must vary so as to address the differing environmental challenges each country confronts. For Romania, this may simply mean one last effort at assisting parties in their movement away from a *nomenklatura* to a meritocratic elite. In Serbia, building on an earlier generation of party assistance to the democratic struggle against authoritarianism, assistance strategies might do more to encourage cross-cutting, issue-based party platforms to help diminish the divisive role of ethnic and nationalist politics. In Georgia, assistance strategies must confront an emerging dominant party system in which the governing United National Movement, its democratic ideals notwithstanding, applies its dominance of state resources to the maintenance of uninterrupted rule. And in Kyrgyzstan, party assistance must delicately negotiate between the potential for real political chaos and, at the same time, the opening that political stalemate provides for constitutional reform and for building the institutional foundations for future party democracy. In all four countries, the assistance goal is the same: aiding the creation of democratic political parties capable of aggregating and representing social interests. The strategies for achieving this shared goal must be individualized and tailored to each country's structural constraints.

Structural Variations and Assistance Strategies

Speaking more broadly, we can make recommendations about the types of programs most appropriate or most likely to be successful in different circumstances. The effectiveness of political party assistance can be increased by adjusting development strategies so as to address the varying challenges parties face under differing regime types. In particular, we consider three different types of political environments in which the U.S. government supports political party assistance: (1) semiauthoritarian regimes initiating potentially competitive elections; (2) inchoate democracies attempting postelection consolidation, often after a transitional election has taken place; and (3) young democracies moving toward third and fourth round competitive elections.

In semiauthoritarian settings, we suggest that political party assistance would do well to focus as much if not more on the process of elections as on the platforms and internal development of individual parties contesting elections. In contrast, in environments of post-election consolidation, where prodemocracy coalitions are fragmenting, we find that assistance strategies that target platform articulation and voter outreach are often what inchoate political parties need. Last, in young democracies, that have previously held competitive elections, we find that political entrepreneurs are beginning to understand the value of voter outreach, platform development and other features of advanced parties. In these situations, assistance probably should focus on reforms that parties are less likely to adopt entirely on their own initiative, such as in areas of internal democracy, or, in advanced cases, begin to phase out party assistance altogether.

The preceding discussion is an attempt to move beyond critique and toward providing the beginnings of a tool kit for conceptualizing and addressing the diverse challenges implementers must confront in varying settings. These prescriptions, we should note, emerge from a four-country sample. Importantly, though, these four countries are representative of a broader constellation of regimes in differing stages of political change and, as such, provide what we hope is a sound foundation for the further generation and refinement of party assistance strategies.

ISSUES OF STRATEGY FOR PARTY ASSISTANCE

A number of issues about strategies for political party assistance emerge from the case studies and other research and experience. These issues are discussed in greater detail in the body of the report.

1. Understanding the Real Incentives of Parties and Politicians

To be effective and sustainable, political party assistance should directly address the incentives of politicians, political parties and others with a stake in reform by helping them to understand how reform can work in their best interests. Programs often must motivate party leaders, government officials and others to change their behavior. But appeals to politicians to do the right thing or to act in the public interest cannot realistically be expected to trump politicians pursuing what they perceive to be their own interests. Fundamentally, assistance should try to create a link in the mind of politicians between the public interest and their own interests, namely, achieving electoral success or political power. Advisors can argue that changes in behavior have major political implications and try to demonstrate how changes can benefit parties, particularly if they are early adopters. A related proposition is that in some contexts, such as in many consolidating or more open democratic systems, those seeking to change the behavior of parties should consider program strategies to alter incentives, such as working with civil society organizations to increase pressure on parties from the “demand side.”

2. Partisanship and the Selection of Partners

USAID’s *Political Party Assistance Policy* provides that USAID programs “do not seek to determine election outcomes” but also prohibits assistance to “nondemocratic parties.” Even before the adoption of this policy in 2003, USAID and the party institutes declined to work with parties with extremist, violent or other nondemocratic tendencies. While the intent and justification for this policy are clear, it can be difficult to determine where to draw the line. To build parties as organizations and reinforce democratic norms, decision makers should try to construe limits to engagement narrowly; too strict an interpretation can be counterproductive in some environments. Some level of engagement short of actual assistance, even with extreme, nondemocratic parties, might help to expose them to democratic norms and push them to some modicum of reform. It may be possible to engage with parties without providing them direct assistance, such as in local governance programs or in discussions of policy or institutional reforms. Moreover, particularly in post-communist countries, party affiliations and platforms are as much instrumental as they are substantive. Providing or withholding assistance based on party identification

risks alienating seemingly illiberal elites and parties that, provided the right incentives, might actually prove reformist and progressive. And it risks wasting resources on seemingly liberal elites and parties that, under changed conditions, subsequently prove autocratic and retrograde.

3. Contesting Elections and Improving Capacity as Competing Party Assistance Goals

Election assistance should be a means to an end—a method of building popular support, connecting parties to constituents and refining their policy messages, with the ultimate goal of producing a system with internally democratic, representative parties. As noted, USAID policy states that party assistance should be offered equitably and should not seek to influence particular electoral outcomes.

Election assistance can be an important priority in some situations, particularly in semi-authoritarian contexts. However, although an electoral victory over an entrenched authoritarian regime can be a legitimate short-term goal, there is a danger in emphasizing elections as the standard for success in party assistance. While electoral and organizational development goals are not necessarily at odds, USAID’s continued focus in some countries on electoral assistance, possibly at the expense of organizational and governance programs, may hamper the further development of democratic parties and the eventual marginalization of nondemocratic ones. There is also a tendency to focus resources on party assistance only around election time, rather than in sustained multi-year efforts that can build parties over the long-term.

If the ultimate goal is the creation of a viable party system with multiple democratically oriented, popularly supported parties, programs that have the appearance of taking sides in elections risk creating a situation in which the goal of electoral victory for one side outweighs the broader goal of providing the electorate with meaningful choice and representation. In general the purpose of election-related party assistance should be to build strong political party organizations, not to help particular parties in particular elections.

4. Public Opinion Research

Public opinion polling in Europe and Eurasia has had many positive effects and has been well received by many parties in the region. Polling provides important input into the development of party platforms and campaign strategy. The attention to polling has helped establish survey research as a democratic norm and has focused attention on the importance of public opinion in a democracy. The institutes have helped parties to interpret and appreciate the value of public opinion research, and even though many academic researchers in the region have had previous experience with conducting and interpreting survey research, the work of the institutes has had the ancillary benefit of enhancing the capacity of local research organizations and firms to conduct and analyze opinion surveys.

At the same time, there are several potential concerns with this focus on survey research. First, there is some debate about whether and when the results of survey research should

be publicly released and the extent to which the larger public can understand the nuances of survey results. In some instances, the party institutes prefer to share polling results only with particular parties, but parties or funders may want to share findings more widely. Although understanding of polling is improving, the media, political parties and the public may not always have the knowledge, experience and sophistication necessary to interpret it; this does not necessarily argue against survey research, but it does raise questions about the danger that polls may be misinterpreted or misused. Second, despite the common view that party programs need to pay greater attention to issues of governance, emphasis on survey research can reinforce the tendency for such programs to focus on elections, even when such research is conducted in nonelection years. This is true despite the significant efforts of USAID and implementers to focus polls on issues and deemphasize questions about voter attitudes toward particular parties, candidates and public officials. Third, it is important that survey research sponsored in the context of party assistance programs serves a development purpose rather than being weighed down by attempts to obtain information for the use of foreign organizations and governments for other analytical and foreign-policy purposes.

Ultimately, survey research can contribute to party development and to the electoral performance of democratic parties. But party assistance providers should be judicious about the use of public opinion polling and should keep in mind the goal of party (and democratic) development. The main objectives should be the transfer of skills and norms, such as convincing party clients of the value of listening to the views of their supporters and the larger public and testing whether party messages are getting through to the public. Most important, providers should continue to ensure the impartiality, integrity and technical competence of the local organizations and foreign consultants conducting and interpreting such research.

5. Working in the Center versus the Regions

Although well-designed party programs can create a constituency for reform at the national level, training party activists in the center does not necessarily trickle down to their counterparts at the local level. As USAID and implementers understand, a considerably more sustained presence in the regions is essential if democracy assistance is to succeed in helping parties build grassroots constituencies outside the capital. This is particularly true in countries where the political elite is highly concentrated but population is more broadly dispersed or where communication between the center and the regions is poor.

6. Integrating Women and Youth into Political Party Assistance Strategies

Women, and issues of particular concern to women, are underrepresented in political parties and government institutions in most if not all of the countries receiving political party assistance in Europe and Eurasia. Minorities confront similar barriers to effective participation. In addition, many believe that involving and building the capacity of young party leaders is a way to increase the orientation of parties toward reform. But, while gender and youth initiatives in party assistance are normatively laudable, they seem unlikely to succeed, at least initially, in many political environments unless parties see such initiatives as being in their own self-interest. Most parties will not focus on includ-

ing women candidates and appealing to women's interests unless they think they gain some advantage from doing so. In the meantime, such programs run the risk of diverting attention from the more fundamental needs of building ideologically coherent, organizationally capable political parties. Given sufficient resources, an emphasis on youth and gender inclusiveness concomitant with a focus on fundamentals of party capacity building and strengthening probably can contribute to broadened political representation of important constituencies in the long run, especially if parties start to recognize the potential electoral benefits of reaching out to these constituencies. But in the near term, women and youth are often perceived to be at the margins of what is really important to many parties and their leaders, and without an attempt to change that perception a focus on such efforts risks making party programs marginal as well.

7. Civil Society Assistance and Party Assistance

To encourage mutually reinforcing cooperation between political parties and civil society organizations (CSOs), a consciously integrated civil society-party assistance strategy could encourage CSOs to: (1) monitor manipulation of and corruption within political parties, (2) provide leadership, organizational and analytical skills for party activists, (3) help aggregate and represent grassroots demands for reform, and (4) provide policy-issue expertise.

At the same time, the civil society-political party relationship can accelerate rather than dampen divisive ideologies and hamper democratic reforms, through (1) aggregation and representation of illiberal interests and (2) politicization of what should be nonpartisan efforts, such as domestic election monitoring. The reformist potential of civil society-political party relations rests on a paradox: if civil society is to protect against illiberal politics and to promote competitive, multiparty democracy, civic organizations must themselves remain nonpoliticized. Multiparty democracy benefits from organizations that can serve as watchdogs against corruption, represent and articulate social interests, and improve the capacity of parties by making available qualified experts. To achieve this productive and liberalizing relationship, however, party assistance strategies must not only work with civic organizations, they must actively assist civic organizations capable of acting as honest brokers in struggles against the incompetence, corruption and abuses of power that so often define transitional political systems.

8. Party System Aid

At times, assistance providers work to improve party systems, for example by attempting to reform the legal framework for parties, elections and political finance. Much of this assistance is provided to election management bodies, government authorities, legislatures and nongovernmental organizations rather than directly to parties. Parties, however, can play important, even vital, roles in bringing about institutional reform, for their interests will be directly affected. Assistance providers can work with parties to help them identify their interests and build political support for needed reforms.

AGENCY/IMPLEMENTATION ISSUES

Issues of agency and implementation also emerge from the case studies.

1. Program Management and Competing Institutional Interests

The quality of working relationships among the embassy, USAID mission, party institutes and other donors can affect the quality of party assistance outcomes. These actors sometimes have competing institutional interests. Within the U.S. government and between the U.S. government and the party institutes, differences of perspective and opinion can cause tensions that can potentially detract from the effectiveness of assistance programs.

The party institutes should be encouraged to put more emphasis on monitoring and evaluation of their own work or to allow it from outside sources. Further broad study of party assistance and other political development program impacts and challenges should be encouraged.

In some countries USAID and the party institutes sometimes disagree on priorities, budgets, strategies and tactics, although in other countries there is clear and lasting consensus. These disagreements stem from institutional causes as well as from the complex nature of political party development and potential tensions between democratization and other foreign policy interests. There are also differences of opinion between and within agencies of the U.S. government about the relative importance of political party assistance. Greater involvement of the State Department in foreign assistance carries implications not only for broad policy goals, but also for strategic and tactical decisions. There are possible differences between short-term diplomatic goals and longer-term development goals that can affect assistance programs. In such areas, USAID's institutional knowledge and experience should be key resources in making decisions, whatever form the process takes.

2. Program Scope and Competition

The party institutes work in other areas in addition to political party assistance. Accordingly, party assistance programs are not always clearly separated from civil society, civic education, monitoring, legislative, and other democracy and governance programs.

Within the political party assistance field, as traditionally defined, both institutes often conduct a full range of programs in most countries, including work in each of the three broad categories of party assistance programs: (1) elections, (2) organizational capacity-building, and (3) and governance. Although there are some important differences in emphasis and style between the institutes, their approaches and program tactics are largely similar. The institutes work in most of the same countries in the region, including most of the countries that have U.S. assistance programs, and their programs often appear overlapping, although they report that they have generally agreed on a discernible division of labor and a solid reinforcement of each other's work.

There are other sources of assistance to parties in the region. First, European party foundations operate in many countries in the region, though most of them have emerged only in very recent years and operate with tiny budgets, and even the older, well-funded German party foundations during the 1990s moved largely away from party work (in favor of work with civil society organizations, think-tanks, academic institutions and civic education efforts) in much of the world. Second, nondemocratic and nationalist parties in several countries are receiving outside assistance from other governments, albeit without the transparency necessary for the public or the international community to assess the nature of such relationships.

Third, parties in the region, including democratic parties, are increasingly receiving assistance from paid political consultants, even where political party aid is available for free. Such private consulting is offered for a more narrow purpose and is more oriented to election tactics and other short-term considerations than is U.S. government-funded party assistance, which is more focused on longer-term party-building. Once parties can afford to hire outside political consultants, however, the U.S. government should consider whether to continue to provide them assistance, although by itself the use of consultants would not be determinative. At the very least, competition, even from European and private sources, will require USAID and the party institutes to be more creative and to adapt their programs if parties are still going to seek their assistance. But this must be done without bowing to the temptation to serve as *de facto* political consultants on election strategies.

3. Establishing Democratic Norms, Building Relationships and Representing the U.S.

Political party assistance is often criticized, and party assistance programs certainly have weaknesses that can and should be addressed. But such criticisms often overlook the less tangible, more fundamental benefits of party assistance: the opportunity to build relationships with local parties and political elites that can reinforce important democratic norms. Even if structural constraints are difficult to overcome, or if resources are not sufficient to initiate a sweeping democratic transition, assistance to political parties can encourage the socialization of democratic norms and the acceptance of basic democratic values. Furthermore, maintaining a presence in a country allows assistance providers to seize unexpected opportunities for democratic reform when they present themselves.

The suggestion that political party assistance can make lasting, positive contributions merely by the presence of providers is not to excuse ineffective programs or to obviate the need for rigorous critiques of current programs and efforts to improve on current weaknesses. Rather, it argues for maintaining assistance to parties even in the face of daunting structural constraints.

CASE STUDY SUMMARIES

Based on its field visits and background research, DI's team produced case study reports for each of the four countries examined in this study. They are included as Appendices. The following brief summaries highlight a few of the major points from each case study.

Georgia

The Georgia case illustrates well the constructive role political party assistance can have in the run up to competitive elections and the critical need for continued party assistance during periods of postelectoral consolidation. Since the 2003 Rose Revolution and Eduard Shevardnadze's peaceful departure from power, USAID has continued to work closely with political office holders and, as a result, continues to provide valued assistance to Georgia's democratically oriented ruling United National Movement (UNM). Smaller parties that were formerly allied with the UNM, however, have become dissatisfied with the level of consolidation around the ruling party and with its control over all levels and branches of government. The resulting increase in the number of parties with little government representation suggests that future USAID political party assistance strategy might consider supplementing ongoing parliament and executive-oriented programs with new programming that deepens assistance to the struggling and poorly organized political opposition. The central challenge for USAID party assistance in Georgia today is translating the success the party institutes had working with the united 2003 pro-democracy coalition to engaging many competing yet still pro-democracy oriented political parties. USAID officials, along with their party institute counterparts, well understand this changed reality and have indicated that future party assistance strategies will consolidate the successes of the current parliamentary program while, at the same time, deepening assistance to parties without parliamentary representation.

Kyrgyzstan

The Kyrgyz case demonstrates that, even in challenging environments, party assistance can encourage semiauthoritarian states toward increased political pluralism. At the same time, it illustrates that hard won political openings may be followed by authoritarian backsliding rather than by the consolidation of competitive politics. The advance of political pluralism and democratically oriented parties is not a linear process and the achievement of downstream political party assistance objectives—such as better center-region relations among party branches and greater voter outreach—is dependent on the prior achievement of an improved political environment within which political parties can operate. Accordingly, in Kyrgyzstan the party institutes concentrated much of their efforts, particularly following the executive leadership change in March 2005, on assisting attempts to improve the political environment so as to help institutionalize norms of political pluralism and competitive elections. At the time of this writing, the constitutional reform process in Kyrgyzstan is ongoing and tenuous. Nevertheless, assistance in this continuing process has proven helpful in encouraging a more deliberative and open environment for constitutional reform, something which is critical if, in turn, Kyrgyzstan's constitution is to guarantee a deliberative and open environment for political contestation.

The analysis of political party assistance in Kyrgyzstan generates several hypotheses for further study beyond the Kyrgyz case. First, at the institutional level, this analysis demonstrates that attention and assistance to reforming formal institutions and constitutional design can lay the foundations for future political party growth. Second, field research in the regions suggests that, while well-designed party programs can create a constituency

for reform in the capital, a considerably more sustained presence in the regions is essential if democracy assistance is to succeed in building grassroots constituencies for political parties outside the capital. Third, for youth- and women-focused assistance programs to succeed, party assistance must encourage not only youth and women wings within political parties but also must work to change incentive structures that as of now hold few rewards for more inclusive voter outreach.

Romania

Romania's ongoing post-1989 transition to democracy and its accession to full EU membership in January 2007 provide the larger context for political party assistance there. Overall, Romania is in the process of a relatively successful democratic transition, aided substantially by the United States, though USAID and the party institutes are now completing their work there. In joining the EU, Romania would seem to have embarked on a new stage of this transition, but the country has much more to do to consolidate its democracy in the new European context.

USAID and the party institutes have supported relatively modest party assistance efforts during three phases of DG assistance: (1) early support for national-level reforms including limited party assistance; (2) a subsequent emphasis on local democratic development, including support by the party institutes for local political parties; and (3) a final "pre-graduation" effort to transfer local progress to national institutions. Parties, however, continue to face challenges of transition and consolidation. On the one hand, there seems to be a long-term movement towards a system with two dominant parties, further contributing to stability and to a basis for further advances. On the other hand, parties have continuing needs for development of their basic capacities to address public needs rather than private interests, to participate in the formulation of public policy through expertise, to advance internal party democracy, and to combat party corruption, which continues at an alarming level.

Modest USAID investments in PPA, along with the incentives generated by Romania's joining the EU, have helped to deepen and institutionalize political party development. Many observers claim, however, that party assistance strategies have not kept pace with changing circumstances. Parties now feel competent to conduct their own training of party activists and parliamentary staff members. Some suggest that while there is still a need for outside training expertise at the local level, it needs to be more targeted and specialized. For party assistance in Romania to be effective going forward, it would require a deeper understanding of the needs and incentives of political parties than now exists. In any event, going forward, political parties and others in Romania seem to agree that party development driven by domestic NGOs and parties themselves is the best approach.

Serbia

In Serbia, major investments in the democratic transition, including political party assistance, laid the groundwork for relatively effective long-term assistance to political party development. Early support for regime change gave way to expanded support for the political transition from within the country, which continues as support for the still incom-

plete consolidation of the democratic system. Serbia's political environment presents considerable challenges for democratic development in general and for political parties in particular, ranking somewhere between the more hospitable environments of Central and Eastern Europe and the more hostile environments of Eurasia. In the face of this, political parties in Serbia have developed substantially in recent years and well-resourced political party assistance has contributed to that change.

Democratic political parties in Serbia have made institutional progress since overthrowing Milosevic and initiating a political transition, but the movement of party leaders into government has weakened party leadership and structures. The resulting "governance gap" has hampered intra-party democracy and has hurt the capacity of political parties outside government. Unresolved political issues with roots in the Milosevic era, such as the status of Kosovo, have also hindered prospects for political reform. Weak leadership has plagued the political process, and democratic political parties have failed to form effective coalitions or approaches to reform. Unrealized expectations have led to substantial public disillusionment, and voter apathy, combined with long-established regional patterns of ethnic divisions, has strengthened the hand of nationalist parties.

Party assistance has focused considerable attention on election-related assistance, and USAID and the U.S. embassy have continued to encourage this approach. In part, this is because of the particular nature of Serbia's democratic transition, which has compelled a focus on democratic parties' election readiness, both under Milosevic and afterward. This has led to considerable improvements in party organization and party campaigning. By consensus, however, PPA efforts in the area of governance have been more limited.

Still, political party programming in Serbia has been evolving from electoral politics toward legislative politics and good governance. Moving beyond Kosovo, the International Criminal Tribunal and other such issues and dismantling the still powerful vestiges of the Milosevic regime will afford the opportunity to tackle many of the critical governance issues that remain. As part of a new emphasis on parties in governance, party assistance programs should consider new initiatives such as supporting policy expertise in parties and parliament to help the Serbian policy environment mature away from nationalist symbolic issues toward addressing more concrete issues that affect quality of life.