Lending a Hand While Keeping Our Distance

INTERVIEW WITH JEANE J. KIRKPATRICK

*Demokratizatsiya:* Dr. Kirkpatrick, how do you feel about what’s going on in Russia?

*Kirkpatrick:* I was at a lunch at the Woodrow Wilson Center for Aleksander Yakovlev the day after the appointment of Primakov as prime minister, and do you know what Yakovlev said? I was very interested in his comments. He said that it was an excellent appointment, that Primakov was an old friend of his, a good friend of his. He said he thought it was the best appointment that could be made in Russia at that time. Primakov, he said, was able to win a majority in the Duma, which is absolutely necessary to preserve government law in Russia today, and that’s important, in my opinion—to preserve the constitutional framework of Russian government. Anyway, he went on to say that everybody thought of Primakov as anti-American, and I admit I was one of them, but Yakovlev said that wasn’t so. He said Primakov wasn’t anti-American; he was just a Russian nationalist—not an extreme nationalist, just a Russian, if you will, principally concerned about Russia.

Yakovlev believed Primakov was strong enough and reasonable enough to be able to restore some sort of calm to Russia, which he believed was very important at that time. This was a period, you remember, when there was quite a lot of tumult. So I listened very carefully to what Yakovlev said, and I decided—though I knew a good deal about the impression we had of Primakov in the Reagan years, I had not had personal dealings with him, and I had high regard for Yakovlev—that I’d withhold judgment. Then and there, I made the decision that I would simply watch and wait to see what happened. Well, I’m still watching and waiting and hoping for the best.

I do note that he has managed to restore some calm; you can see that in the European press and the American press. That’s already a good thing, if he’s been able to do that. But I also read that he hasn’t, that his economic policies have been

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bizarre at best. But that doesn’t matter. We don’t necessarily know what is best for Russia in the economic domain. I am not among those Americans who believe that an enlightened Russian government would necessarily follow American economists’ plans for Russian restructuring. I think that an economy, like almost any other aspect of the society, must fit the society, and precious few Americans know what fits Russian society in much detail, economically speaking. In addition, I believe that there has never been a case in history of a country seeking to transform a wholly centralized, socialized economy into a free market economy. There has really never been an economy so wholly centralized and socialized for as long as the Russian economy, which means habits have formed and expectations are based on that long experience. The transformation of that economy to a free market economy has to be very, very difficult, and it has to take some time. I don’t think anybody knows how to do it, frankly. I don’t think any Russians know how to do it, either, because it has never been done in history.

And so I have tried not to judge the specific reforms or proposals that Primakov has adopted and I have been pleased to see some sort of observation of the constitutional requirements in Russia today. By that I mean his submitting the names of those he chose for his cabinet to the Duma for approval. I think it’s very important for Russia to have a government that strengthens expectations of respect for law and the constitution.

Demokratizatsiya: What would Primakov have to do to win your support?
Kirkpatrick: Oh, it’s not for me to decide.

Demokratizatsiya: I mean Americans such as you who are holding back, watching and waiting. What would he have to do to earn your respect?
Kirkpatrick: I suppose to behave in a judicious fashion and a constitutional one, respecting law, and to demonstrate common sense. I think that it’s going to take a lot of trial and error to stabilize a Russian society based on very different principles than the Soviet system. And I am personally prepared to respect anybody, any government, that can do it.

I think stability itself is of value in a government in Russia today—not a communist government, however. I don’t think any Americans want to see a stable communist government. Zhirinovsky has no admirers in the United States. One thing I think Americans would like to see, though, is the return of some stability based on policies and people who hopefully are democratic, at least not anti-democratic. Look at who you have to choose among, for goodness sake. Zhirinovsky is a crazy man, and Zyuganov an old-style tyrant. His party is much too strong for comfort. So if Primakov can maintain a government that can build a majority without relying on either one of those parties, then that already wins my respect as a worthwhile political achievement. And if he can do that while maintaining a degree of economic stability, that’s pretty good.

Demokratizatsiya: How much can he safely regress in restoring state control and economy without damaging the political system?
Kirkpatrick: Well, I think it’s very important to bear in mind that nobody knows really, because it has never been done. I am sure, myself, that Russia cannot continue on the basis of the Soviet economic organization. Russian agriculture today cannot feed the people. There used to be some bad jokes in the United States about there being more bad harvests in Russia, in the Soviet Union, than any other country in human history. That’s because agriculture didn’t work under the Soviet Union. And it’s not working today because it’s still basically organized as it was organized under the Soviet Union, with 90 percent of the land, as I understand it, run in the manner of the collective farms and the state farms. It doesn’t take very much intelligence, after all these years of watching the results, to know that’s a system that doesn’t work.

The problem isn’t with the land in Russia, or with the people in Russia: the problem is with the system. What they ought to do is look at the Chinese. Deng Xiaoping solved this problem very quickly. Deng Xiaoping understood and, with sparkling eyes, he announced that China had made a great discovery. They had discovered that people, peasants, worked harder and produced more food when they got to make some decisions and profit from their production. And, he said, this is great discovery, and we call this the “responsibility system.” Nobody needs credit for that discovery here. But everybody who tries it understands that farmers do produce more food when they get to make some basic decisions about how they’re going to do it—when they’re going to harvest, when they’re going to plant, when they’re going to keep their product and when they’re going to sell it, and how much they’re going to sell it for. Deng Xiaoping’s reform of the Chinese economy produced almost immediate results. And China was quickly confronted with a problem that no communist state had ever had—the “problem” was a surplus. They didn’t know what to do with it. Well, that’s easy—you sell it, you eat it, you give it away. I look forward to the day that Russia has a surplus in its agricultural produce.

I think agriculture is just one very clear-cut example of why an effort to continue, much less to restore, the Soviet-style centralization, public ownership, and so forth, of the economy won’t work—not because anybody opposes it, because it just doesn’t work. And I hope that Primakov will not seek to restore those elements of it that have been dismantled. I hope that he will continue to expand the application of the responsibility principle. I recommend to him that he look at the Chinese experience in the transfer from a wholly centralized agricultural economy to a modified free market. In China, they still don’t permit private ownership of most of the land by the peasants who work it, but they permit ninety-nine-year leases. And that is enough to keep most of us motivated. Ninety-nine
years is long enough to enjoy the profits of our labor and even to pass on some
to our children. I think it would be a very desirable thing for Primakov, or any-
body else who is governing Russia, to take a good hard look at the transforma-
tion of the Chinese economy. China has a booming economy, after all. It’s moved
from an almost wholly centralized, state-controlled economy, to a successful
economic operation that preserves some of those principles of communism.
Eventually they’ll have to come to terms with that, too, you know. But that’s all
right; that’s in the future. And by that time maybe they will have transformed
their system as well.

I remember when there was a lot of discussion about whether or not it was bet-
ter to reform the economy first and then the political system—the path Deng Xiaoping
was attempting to take—or to liberalize the political system first—the path that
Gorbachev chose. There was a lot of speculation about which of these Communist
giants would arrive first at a prosperous economy and a free society that provided
basic liberties to its citizens. The fact is that neither of those countries has yet arrived
at both. China has achieved a fairly successful economy, but with no freedom. Rus-
sia has a lot of freedom today, but a lousy economy. So I think Primakov, or any-
one who governs Russia, has no option but to continue to work on this problem.

Demokratizatsiya: Let me ask you, as an expert on the transitional period, how
to prevent or address the rise of nationalism in those states that are trying to trans-
fer their political systems to democracy.

Kirkpatrick: I think you’ve got to give people some kinds of private gratifi-
cations.

Demokratizatsiya: What do you mean?

Kirkpatrick: I regard extreme nationalism as a very abnormal condition.
Americans are almost never nationalists; we’ve not really been through any
nationalist phases. We don’t understand nationalism for various reasons, but some
of them apply to Russia. Even with the Soviet Union largely dismantled, Russia
remains a pluralist state, with multiple peoples of diverse kinds. How can a plu-
ralist society become the basis of a highly nationalistic state? You’re not all Rus-
sians, after all. You don’t want to disqualify all the non-Russians within your bor-
ders. Then you’re going to have to adopt ideas that are compatible with having a
multinational state, adopt the ideas of pluralism.

Demokratizatsiya: But it doesn’t work. Look at the former Yugoslavia, Rus-
sia, or any multinational states.

Kirkpatrick: Oh, they work. Take a good look at the United States, or Cana-
da, for that matter, which is to a little lesser degree than the United States a multi-
national state. What about Brazil? In the Americas, we have a number of multi-
national states. Maybe we can make it work in the Americas because we are newer
societies. But nobody wants to restore the Russian nationalism of the eighteenth
century, do they? It’s a problem I don’t understand at all, frankly, because it is
based on feelings that are not compatible with modern states in my judgment. You
know France is a multinational state, Britain is a multinational state. You may say, “But there are independence movements in Scotland and Ireland.” That’s true, but there always have been, and Britain has managed to be a successful state, and so have France and Spain. Granted, the Basque movement in Spain has caused some problems. But as with most violent movements, it was never a mass effort, just a small group of Basques who were violent and wanted independence.

**Demokratizatsiya:** So do you think Russia will have to accept the idea that it will always be a multinational state?

**Kirkpatrick:** It isn’t a question of changing and becoming a multinational state. You are multinational; face the facts. And when you do, you’ll see that Russian nationalism doesn’t make any sense.

**Demokratizatsiya:** Anti-Semitism is particularly strong now in Russia, as you know.

**Kirkpatrick:** Yes, and it’s revolting. It’s just revolting. You know, if you think that’ll give you the basis of a successful society, look at Nazi Germany.

**Demokratizatsiya:** I understand. But what can be done?

**Kirkpatrick:** What can you do? You educate your people better, that’s what. Teach them human rights and respect for human rights. Teach them to respect diversity.

**Demokratizatsiya:** And who’s supposed to do that?

**Kirkpatrick:** All of the Russians who understand that’s not the basis for a successful society. Schools. I think decentralization is very, very important for Russia. You know, DeGaulle thought decentralization was very important for France, and I think he was right, about that and many other things. The education system in Russia needs to be decentralized. But the point is they need states; instead of “the” state, they get multiple states. I’m not trying to say what Russia should do, however.

**Demokratizatsiya:** I understand. What you say is intriguing. Dr. Kirkpatrick, what mistakes has Russia made to set us back? It looks like Russia has to start all over again.

**Kirkpatrick:** I don’t see it that way. I don’t think Russia has really regressed ten years. I think Russia has made a great leap forward, in fact—a great leap toward self-government, self-government by consent and law, respect for the rights of people, freedom of speech and expression and choice of profession. I think this is enormous progress. It may not be quite as orderly as it was when there was somebody telling everybody what to do. But it certainly is, I believe, the basis for a much more rich and full and ultimately more successful society.

**Demokratizatsiya:** General Lebed said the situation reminded him of Russia in 1917.
Kirkpatrick: Well, that might even be true in the sense that Russia is at a turning point again.

Demokratizatsiya: No, he didn’t mean that. He meant Russia has to start from scratch, ten years of Perestroika down the drain.

Kirkpatrick: You don’t have to start from scratch. There are a great many Russians who are highly educated in technology, and you know, Russia has a society and people who are rich in their education and their skill. And that certainly is more true today than in 1917. The one thing, it seems to me, that the Soviet regime did was to continue to educate to develop skills and pass them on—technical skills or manual skills that were associated with the modern world. You remember, Lenin talked about the problems of modernization in factories, how difficult it was to train peasants to show up for work at the appropriate hours. Those problems of modernization are long gone in Russia. And I would say that to General Lebed, whom I’ve met a couple of times. I think that Russia today is largely a modern state and a modern society, with people accustomed to the styles of modern living, which was not true in 1917. Actually, the Bolsheviks took Russia through that period, and they did it in the hardest possible way. Working for modernization has always been hard for the Russian population. It was even harder than usual in these recent reforms.

Demokratizatsiya: And they didn’t pay attention to the social price of it.

Kirkpatrick: Right, exactly. They paid less for it. And they provided much less opportunity for individuals to choose whether they preferred to pay that price. If people have to pay the price because they think they can live better, they think they can do better for themselves and their families, it’s easier to pay the price than if they’re being forced to by some powerful government. But in any case, I think Russia has been through that difficult process of modernization. It’s a modern society already.

Modernization poses many interesting questions. The UN talked only about the big two roads to development: capitalism and socialism. In fact, there is only one road to development, basically a free market road. When I say free market, I don’t mean a system without any social regulation. All modern, affluent economies are welfare states. All of them have a degree of regulation. A safety regulation in ours is wage regulations—minimum wages and maximum hours, that sort of thing. But the capitalist road fundamentally relied on incentives and the hard work of individuals, on individual decisions, and individual order. The Soviet order just didn’t work, except with coercion. Too high a degree of coercion ultimately doesn’t work nearly as well as the attraction to the good things in life.

Demokratizatsiya: Dr. Kirkpatrick, what do you think about General Lebed?

Kirkpatrick: I think he kind of looks like a young Stalin, in physical appearance anyway. I doubt that he repeated Stalin’s politics, though. He looked very much as I expected a Russian general to look, a strong, Russian general. He has sensible things to say.
Demokratizatsiya: Yes, but did he find Americans supportive of him when he was in the United States?

Kirkpatrick: I didn’t feel he was looking for public support as much as he was looking to get acquainted a bit. I think he got acquainted with a good many people. I think the people who have found American support are Gorbachev and Yeltsin. And I think it would be easy for any liberal, democratically-oriented Russian leader to find American support.

Demokratizatsiya: I see. What about the state of American policy toward Russia now? If you were in charge of this policy, what might you change?

Kirkpatrick: First of all, let me just say, my sense is that both the Bush and Clinton administrations have tried hard. They’ve had very good intentions. They’ve given high priority to U.S. policy on Russia. They have sought, with great seriousness, to support the transition to a more open, successful democratic Russian society.

We think we have a large stake in the success of Russia’s changes, both economic and political. And I believe that’s true. I think it’s very important for Europe, it’s important for the United States, it’s important for the world, as well as to the Russian people, of course. But I don’t have any fundamental disagreements with the policy of either the Bush administration or the Clinton administration. Sometimes I have thought that the Clinton administration, particularly, has tried too hard to micromanage economic issues in Russian policy. And I don’t think that’s a good idea. I think they came to do less of it, but I think they were doing more in the beginning.

I’m not a big admirer of the IMF policy. I think the IMF too often behaves as if there is only one disease and only one remedy. And, of course, the fact is there are many diseases and many remedies for them. I’ve never quite felt that the IMF held the answers for Russians. I think the IMF believes more in punishments; they’re too austere for my tastes. I think reforms that rely on rewards are more likely to succeed than reforms that rely principally on austerity. I just don’t believe in bad-tasting medicine, as long as there’s any alternative. When you’ve got a plan that’s going to depend entirely on the effort and intentions and will of the people, then you had better give them something to look forward to and help them make their lives livable while they’re doing it. I think that ought to be the basis of American policy toward Russia. We ought to help them. We can be useful. But I think we also have to remember that it is arrogant and extreme to presume that you’ve got the wisdom or all the answers for what Russia needs to do. We don’t.

Demokratizatsiya: Does it bother American politicians that Russia often disagrees with American foreign policy, toward Iraq and the former Yugoslavia, for instance?

Kirkpatrick: I think it depends on what the issues are. I have some personal, fairly strong disagreements with Primakov on some issues. I don’t think it’s appropriate for a democratic country to support really violent anti-democratic regimes, which exist in both Iraq and the former Yugoslavia. I think Serbia has
followed violent anti-democratic policies, and there’s been a very high human
cost—in Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia, and now in Kosovo. I don’t think that mis-
placed nostalgia for a heavy-handed police regime should compel leaders of Rus-
sia to adopt the policy of supporting regimes that are as repressive as the Stalin-
ist regime. I think that’s a mistake, a real mistake.

A democratic Russia needs to join in encouraging a democratic, independent
Europe—southern Europe, central Europe, and eastern Europe as well as west-
ern Europe. We encouraged that kind of Europe, if you will—not an entity that
we could control, but one that would control itself, where people enjoy the ben-
efit of self-government. I think that’s the way to get to peace; I also think it’s the
way to get to success.

That is my biggest disagreement with Primakov. I have no doubt that Russia
has the right to follow any policy it chooses. I don’t criticize it because it does-

Demokratizatsiya: It looks like President Yeltsin’s political career is reaching
its conclusion. How would you reflect on it?

Kirkpatrick: I think Yeltsin is one of the historic figures of the time, a truly
historic figure in Europe and in the world. And I think that as historic figures often
are, he was very much self-guided. He was a true political man who had a sense
of where his society was and where it ought to go. He behaved with great bold-
ness and vision and had the largest impact on Russia of any man since Lenin.

Demokratizatsiya: So you think he’ll occupy a prominent place in history
books?

Kirkpatrick: Listen, I’m an academic. I understand that what the history
books write depends on which historians write it. But yes, if you asked an hon-
est and far-sighted historian writing a book, they would agree with what I’ve said
about Yeltsin. I think Yeltisin’s impact has been enormous and enormously posi-
tive, because I don’t think Russia can or will choose to return to a regime of an
autocratic czar or an autocratic dictator seeking to control all aspects of people’s
lives. I don’t think the next ruler of Russia is going to try to establish himself as
either a Breshnev or a Castro.

Demokratizatsiya: Do you have anything else to add to our discussion?

Kirkpatrick: Yes. I’d like to say that there are many rewards and benefits
available in our time to free people who enjoy reasonable prosperity, and I hope
the Russian people will be able to enjoy those benefits soon.