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## **Abstract**

Depending on one's perspective, democracy promotion has been a part of US foreign policy for a century, (since the occupation of the Philippines), half a century (since the Marshall Plan), or a quarter century (since Ronald Reagan's creation of the National Endowment for Democracy). Whichever history you accept, democracy promotion came into its own in Eastern Europe and Russia in the early 1990s, where political pluralism, rule of law, and civil society were championed as vital for consolidating the defeat of totalitarianism in Eastern Europe. Under the management of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), democracy has also become a multi-million dollar business involving planners and managers in US government agencies, Beltway contractors, progressive non-governmental organizations, and an aspiring professional class of advocates, lobbyists, service providers and organizers in countries across the former Eastern bloc. Like any business, this one also has its gurus, efficiency experts, management consultants, evaluators, and critics who have combined to generate an extensive body of literature on the successes and failures of the enterprise. The utility of number-crunching as guide for future programming, or as indicator of what has actually happened, diminishes as one moves either from Washington D.C. out to where programs and projects get implemented, or from the abstract to the concrete. One might perhaps expect Western social scientists-especially in the fields of anthropology, sociology, political science or public policy-to have recognized this deficit in field data, and filled it. Yet for a variety of reasons, including in particular the relative value placed on "pure scholarship" as opposed to "applied" work, and a generally critical stance toward working in proximity to the U.S. government, they have not produced a significant body of empirically-grounded case-studies to supplement the statistically-based big picture. This paper argues that the next step in understanding how theory gets turned into practice will depend on harnessing, more effectively than to date, the reflections and insights of this group of participants, by enlisting them as collaborators in description, analysis and diagnosis.