

“Putin’s Russia: Stability and Democracy,” a lecture by Igor Zevelev
Emile Dawisha

In his April 2 lecture entitled, “Putin’s Russia: Stability and Democracy,” Igor Zevelev offered a more emotionally-detached — and at times even optimistic — rhetoric about the state of democracy in Russia. At Miami University’s “Russian Journalism Under Fire” conference, Putin took a more pragmatic stance toward the Putin regime that contradicted the fervently anti-Putin sentiments expressed by several other guests of the two-day conference.

Zevelev is the Washington bureau chief of a Russian news and information agency called RIA Novosti, but a political scientist by training. In his speech, he outlined the steps that fledgling democracies must take before they can achieve true democracy. The first step — achieving stability — is one that he believes Russia has reached, at least to some degree.

“The country looks stable, living standards are growing, and the president is popular,” Zevelev said. “There is a measure of democracy and openness.”

So Zevelev asks: “Why is there corruption?”

Moreover, why cannot Russia achieve the second stage of democratic development: liberty.

The overarching problem, he said, is the lack of institutions in Russia that push for personal liberties and a more transparent government.

“In America, you have institutions for everything,” he said. “In Russia, there is only one working institution: the presidency.”

However, Zevelev also noted that Russia has an “educated and growing middle class,” a vital component to a flourishing democracy that other failing democracies — i.e. Iraq, the post-Soviet countries of central Asia, and scores of African nation — lack.

“When the middle class grows, enjoys freedom to earn money, to own property, to travel, to ignore government — then I hope it will demand real struggle against corruption,” Zevelev said. “But this demands institutions that will dig up dirt.”

Prior to joining RIA Novosti in 2005, Zevelev was a professor of Russian studies at the George Marshall European Center for Security Studies in Germany. He has taught at the University of Washington, University of California-Berkeley, San Jose State University, and Macalester College. He also has written five books and numerous articles on the politics of Russia, Asian countries, human rights, international relations and security issues.