

Promoting a Strong Civil Society: US Foreign Assistance and Russian Non-Governmental Organizations

James Richter
September 1997
PONARS Policy Memo 13
Bates College

In February 1997, President Clinton launched the Partnership for Freedom, a new program of bilateral assistance for democracy promotion in Russia and the other NIS countries. This program asks for more funding than in previous years and over a longer period of time than was foreseen in the program authorized by the Freedom Support Act of 1992. This funding reached a high of \$1.3 billion for Russia in 1994 and had declined to \$95 million in 1997. Under the Partnership for Freedom proposal, the NIS account would receive \$900 million in 1998, of which \$242 million would be earmarked for Russia.)

The program also represents a shift in strategy. The earlier program sought to facilitate institutional and policy reform with large, short-term technical assistance grants. The new initiative emphasizes a "bottom-up" strategy designed to strengthen civil society. In particular, it would expand exchange programs between the NIS and the United States, encourage the creation of small business and microlending enterprises, and strengthen the "third sector" of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in the region.

The new emphasis makes sense. Some important reforms envisioned in the Freedom Support Act have already been accomplished in Russia--most notably the privatization of state property. In other areas, technical assistance has not helped reform, and may even have hurt it. Assistance grants too frequently went to US advisors and consultants rather than to the institutions needing reform. Much of this advice went unheeded, either because it did not apply to the specific conditions in Russia, or because its recipients had little genuine interest in change. In some cases, large assistance grants enabled powerful agencies and individuals to ignore popular pressure, making them less rather than more accountable to democratic process and procedures. Access to US AID resources may have enabled at least one organization, the Russian Privatization Center, to replicate within their own organization the clientelistic politics so characteristic of the Soviet period. This created a widespread perception that foreign assistance benefited only a small portion of Russian society and that the aim of US assistance is to weaken Russia, not strengthen it.

The new strategy would avoid these pitfalls. Working through private subcontractors such as the Eurasia Foundation, the program would provide direct assistance to a greater proportion of the population and over a wider geographic area. Rather than strengthening governmental bodies, it would empower individuals and small organizations to perform for themselves social tasks previously performed by the state, and enable them to bring their demands more effectively to

local and national governments. It also would provide fewer opportunities for wide-scale corruption (although some small-scale corruption remains unavoidable).

NGOs in Russia Today

The proliferation of NGOs (particularly grass-roots organizations) is one of the most encouraging signs of democracy in Russia today. By 1997, over 50,000 NGOs had registered with the Russian government. They include public advocacy groups for human rights and the environment, microlending institutions and business incubators, women's organizations, providers of health care and education, and housing cooperatives.

Despite such promise, the state of the "third sector" in Russia remains precarious. The vast majority of the new grass-roots organizations have few members and even fewer resources. Most do not outlive the enthusiasm of their founders. NGOs tend to be little known in their communities, and those that are known are often met with indifference or suspicion. The most effective organizations, as a rule, sustain themselves with the help of state funding or international assistance, raising the concern that these organization may be more responsive to outside donors than to the needs of the local community.

The reasons for such difficulties can be traced to the Communist Party's domination of all public life under the Soviet regime. This domination prevented Soviet citizens from communicating with each other except through the stilted language and rituals of the official ideology. Social organizations such as trade unions, though nominally independent from the Party and the state, in reality depended upon the regime for funding and personnel, and so acted more as a means of social control than of individual empowerment. Consequently, though many Russians came to rely on the Party-State for their education, employment, housing, health care and even recreation, they also avoided the public sphere as a realm of hypocrisy, surveillance and subordination, retreating as much as possible into a private sphere of trusted family and friends. As a result, no coherent civil society existed to establish the groundwork for a new democratic system once the regime collapsed; instead, Russian society consisted of a multitude of small private worlds cultivated in mutual isolation and distrust.

With no recent tradition of independent social organizations, the new activists must break new ground within an atomized population distrustful of the public sphere. They have little or no experience in raising funds or managing non-profit organizations. More importantly, they cannot articulate even to themselves--much less to their potential constituents and donors--how their activities fits within the context of a broader social mission. Even now, many Russians do not think to organize themselves to improve their current situation, but rather continue blame their difficulties on the disintegration of the state. Even those who have organized regard their activities as a stopgap measure providing services that the state should provide in more stable times.

The new NGOs have had to overcome the Soviet legacy of popular cynicism and suspicion towards all public organizations. Unfortunately, the experience of the early 1990s did little to dispel such attitudes. The continued concentration of political and economic power in relatively

few hands has reinforced the feeling that ordinary people can not influence decisions that affect their lives. Moreover, many of the early NGOs had little or no commitment to social change, but were created simply to gain access to scarce governmental or international resources, or alternatively to avoid paying exorbitant taxes on what was essentially a for-profit enterprise. In 1991, for example, I became acquainted with the director of the "business department" of the Veterans for Peace organization in Russia. Although ostensibly an organization designed to encourage contacts between Afghan War veterans and veterans from other countries, this man explained to me in depth how he traded in products he acquired through contacts in the disintegrating Soviet economic bureaucracy. Another acquaintance received state subsidies to support psychological counseling and a workshop for unemployed craftswomen, but in fact used them to create a small shop for sewing supplies.

Even organizations that are genuinely committed to social service often end up reproducing the Soviet pattern of small private worlds; that is, their membership is limited to a small circle of activists and their acquaintances who allocate organizational resources according to personal loyalty rather than more rational criteria. In Ivanovo, for example, the former party secretary in charge of ideology used her influence and connections to establish a network of local educational, business and political organizations for women, and has hired a staff consisting mainly of personal acquaintances. Such practices reinforce the perception that NGOs exist primarily to enrich the organizers and their friends and discourage people without personal connections to the organizers to participate in NGO activities, even to ask for their assistance.

Finally, the new NGOs often found it difficult to work together: they had no common sense of mission, they had few means of contacting each other in the early days of the transition, and they still suffered from the distrust of people outside their own circle of friends that had been encouraged by the Soviet regime. Several women's organizations I spoke to during the early 1990s, for example, professed to be the "only feminist literary group" in Russia, or perhaps the only center for gender studies outside Moscow and St. Petersburg. Fortunately, such communication problems have decreased markedly over the last few years, thanks in part to the efforts of international agencies and organizations. For example, the number of conferences dealing with women's issues, sponsored in part by such organizations as the MacArthur Foundation and Winrock International, have increased dramatically in the last four years. One organization, the Network of East-West Women, has helped connect women's organizations in Russia to the internet, enabling them to communicate with other groups all over the world.

If NGOs have little support from the local community, they have no choice but to look more actively to the state or to the international community for material and moral support. Such dependence raises concerns that NGOs will tailor their agendas and programs to the demands of outside donors rather than to the needs of their constituents. This dilemma vexes NGOs in every country, but the disparity of resources between Russian NGOs and their international donors makes the problem worse.

It is often unclear why some organizations receive outside assistance while others do not. Governmental procedures granting assistance to NGOs are particularly opaque, creating the perception--and perhaps the reality--that "the state chooses to support either big, long-established

funds...or concentrate on 'people they know' rather than on organizations." In sum, the key challenges facing the third sector in Russia today can be summarized as follows:

- outreach: NGOs must try to make a tangible, positive impact on the lives of as many people as possible;
- sustainability: they must have sufficient indigenous sources of revenue to sustain themselves without relying exclusively on governmental or international assistance;
- representativeness: they must ensure that their activities respond to constituent needs rather than serve individual, governmental or international agendas.
- transparency: they must follow procedures to ensure openness and prevent corruption. Most importantly, the new NGOs must build trust among themselves and between themselves and their constituents.

American Priorities and Influence

What can US assistance agencies do to improve the situation? Given the magnitude of the problem, the Partnership for Freedom is unlikely to have a decisive impact, but that's as it should be. NGOs must find the resources within their own community if they are to form the basis of a strong civil society. Yet the US has an interest in ensuring that pioneering NGOs succeed. Successful NGOs can have an important demonstration effect within their community, and as long as these new organizations--even those who don't espouse Western ideals--have a realistic expectation of having some sort of assistance from the United States and Western Europe, they are likely to remain favorably disposed to those countries. Creating such a disposition among the most active Russian citizens can help promote a deeper accord between US and Russian societies than any governmental agreement.

To foster such a disposition, however, US assistance agencies must first ensure that all potential beneficiaries understand how decisions of support are made. Though far more transparent than the Russian government, a perception exists that US AID, in particular, favors individuals and organizations who conform to "Western" customs and ideals. This practice may reward individuals who know the forms of Western society but have little commitment to democratic procedures, while ignoring advocates of democratic procedures among traditional nationalists. More importantly, the practice reinforces a perceived division between "Westerners" and "traditional nationalists," forcing activists to choose between adopting "western" practices and receiving assistance, or foregoing assistance to espouse more traditional ideals. In either case, favoritism strengthens local prejudice that foreign assistance agencies pursue their own interests without regard for Russian society.

Second, US AID programs could be used more effectively if they concerned themselves less with the explicit goals and values Russian NGOs profess, and more with the procedures they follow. Organizations that pursue reformist goals using authoritarian or personalistic methods are unlikely to instill the trust necessary to build a strong popular base. Conversely, organizations using open and transparent methods to pursue their goals, even if the goals themselves do not reflect democratic ideals, may further democracy in spite of themselves. One successful program currently funded by USAID that emphasizes process over result is administered by the Eurasia Foundation. This program provides no direct assistance to individual organizations, but only to

projects that will strengthen the NGO sector as a whole. Such projects include seminars in management and training, efforts to regulate NGOs themselves to ensure accountability and transparency, and conferences and equipment to facilitate communication and networking among existing organizations.

Finally, to the extent that US assistance is directed to particular types of NGOs, it should direct less time and money toward advocacy groups focused on abstract issues such as human rights and women's equality, and more toward organizations pursuing practical goals, such as housing cooperatives, battered women's shelters, employee retraining and microlending enterprises. Advocacy groups are less likely to attract citizen involvement than practical organizations. They require people to commit their time and effort towards achieving an abstract goal at some point in the distant future, and there is no guarantee they will succeed. With such uncertain incentives, a population struggling with economic hardship is unlikely to become active. Secondly, though advocacy groups may promote values that correspond closely to US democratic ideals, they do not always resonate fully among local communities. And if they do not resonate at home, they may rely more heavily on international donors and become more likely to accept these donors' agenda for their own, reinforcing the notion that they promote "foreign" ideals that do not suit Russian reality.

Organizations more oriented to practical needs, on the other hand, have an immediate, tangible impact upon their constituents, demonstrating the potential benefits of public action. Moreover, because they seek to respond to the needs of daily life amid a set of specific circumstances, rather than promote abstract, universal ideals, such organizations are more likely to be responsive to local needs and less likely to be perceived as promoting a foreign agenda. In Kyrgyzstan, for example, one group of women had become frustrated with bureaucratic obstacles to housing construction in their region and formed the Society of Women-Builders "Archa Beshik." While they had hoped to work outside politics as much as possible, they found it necessary to become active when local officials tried to commandeer a school building they had constructed for use as office space. They responded by inviting the press, representatives of international organizations and local government figures to a meeting to decide the building's fate. The building became a school, and the women became active members of civil society with a stake in preserving ties to the international community.

To sum up, Clinton's "Partnership for Freedom" proposal entails a shift in strategy for US bilateral assistance away from reforming governmental institutions and towards building a civil society to monitor and consolidate those reforms. The effort to strengthen civil society in Russia, however, must confront the legacy of distrust left over from the Soviet regime. The current efforts to improve communication between the new grass-roots organizations and to improve the legal environment under which they operate represent an effective and relatively inexpensive means to facilitate democracy in the region, and should be encouraged. However, US aid agencies should not be concerned with the abstract goals and values organizations profess in choosing its recipients, no matter how much these efforts correspond to democratic ideals. Rather, US assistance should concentrate on process over ideology. In addition, it should offer more support to grass-roots organizations pursuing practical goals that have an immediate, positive impact on the daily lives of ordinary citizens. These organizations offer the greatest

promise of overcoming popular distrust of public activism and ensuring that a significant number of the most active Russians are favorably disposed towards the United States.

© PONARS 1997