

Foreign Funding of Social Movements in Russia

Valerie Sperling
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Over the course of the last several years, the United States government and private US foundations have allocated funding to support the development of a women's movement in Russia. These funds are intended to foster the development of a civil society and a market economy. Although the funding brings important benefits to the emergent women's movement, it also creates unexpected side effects. This paper analyzes the impact of foreign funding on the internal dynamics of the Russian women's movement. The analysis suggests that Russia's current economic infrastructure makes social movements receptive to foreign funding, and that foreign funds provide essential support for the Russian women's movement. However, without certain safeguards, the foreign funding itself may undermine the goals that motivate its provision in the first place.

International influences, including funding, affect a social movement's incentive structure. They affect the movement's relationship to the state and the population, sometimes legitimizing movement demands in the eyes of officials, while alienating the movement from the population at the same time. Foreign funding is particularly important, in that it affects inter-group relationships, and helps explain why women's groups in Moscow do not collaborate more with each other, even when they have similar goals and strategies. It also helps to explain why groups do not engage in membership-building as a priority.

History

During the Soviet era, grassroots organizing in general was forbidden. Severe penalties were imposed for unsanctioned political or social action. While independent women's movements flourished in Western Europe and the United States in the 1970s, the sole attempt by a small group of Soviet women to organize an underground women's journal, in 1979, was swiftly repressed: their editorial collective was forcibly disbanded by the KGB, and several of its members deported. Between 1979 and the mid-1980s, there was no independent women's organizing in the Soviet Union. The Soviet Women's Committee was the sole legal representative of women's voice; however, as an organization it was little more than a mouthpiece for the communist party. With Gorbachev's ascension to power, political opportunities for social movement organizing and protest in Russia began to change dramatically. By the mid-1990s, hundreds of women's organizations had formed and registered with the state in order to gain official recognition. Registration was necessary in order to open bank accounts, conduct financial transactions, and so on. These groups include political advocacy organizations, job-training organizations, professional women's groups, charitable organizations, rape crisis centers and hotlines, women's studies research centers, and a variety of others.

Russia's Economic Infrastructure and Social Movement Organizing

Financial and other resources are important for the emergence and development of social movements. But resources are not enough: equally important is the presence of an economic infrastructure in society available to support social movement organizations. Economic infrastructure refers to economic tools. Russia lacks several aspects of economic infrastructure that are crucial to social movement organizing. For instance, in Russia, there is no such thing as direct mail, people do not have checkbooks, and credit cards are not widely used. It is therefore difficult for individuals to make donations to social movement organizations. This situation may be sharply contrasted to that in the United States, where "checkbook activism" prevails. Russia's history of top-down political and economic organization precluded the creation of such means of support for social movement groups.

This underdeveloped economic infrastructure constrains outreach and fundraising strategies for social movement groups. Organizations' choices for how to increase their membership (through direct mail, for example) or obtain support are highly limited. Furthermore, the communications infrastructure in Russia is so dilapidated that the things that NGOs or movement organizations take for granted in the United States, like a reliable postal service, or simple telephone communication between cities, cannot be taken for granted in Russia. The level of technology available to NGOs is limited: faxes and xerox machines are rarely found in the hands of movement groups. The implications of this kind of economic situation are straightforward. The lack of a civil society, the absence of a tradition of non-governmental organizations and social movements, and the impoverished economic infrastructure available to support such organizations all combine to make the development of a domestic funding base very difficult for a social movement in today's Russia.

Impact of Foreign Funding

Because of Russia's economic opportunity structure and the difficulty of domestic fundraising, many women's groups turn directly to the West for funds, taking advantage of Western foundations' and governments' interest in building "civil society." These funds often come in the form of grants for which organizations apply on a competitive basis. Foreign grants supporting women's movement activity in Russia serve many useful purposes, including: helping activists to counter the collapse of women's economic and political status, supporting women's groups' program work in a multiplicity of areas, and providing salaries (however small) for activists who would otherwise be forced for economic reasons to forego their volunteer activity in the women's movement. Funds from US government agencies and private foundations have supported many activities, including: advocacy for a gender-neutral labor code; development of gender studies curricula; the publication of small-run newsletters and journals; and conferences and seminars on sexual harassment, military conversion and other important issues affecting women. These are only a few examples.

However beneficial the foreign funds have been, the implications of this kind of international resource base for social movement organizing are complex.

- The most striking negative effect of foreign grants on the Russian women's movement is divisiveness. Aside from travel and research grants, foreign funders in Russia give grants to organizations, not to individuals. Usually it is only the leaders of the recipient organization who will gain a salary from the grant. Thus, in order for as many people as possible to get funding, the incentive is for many people to form their own small groups. Competition arises for funding and for fringe benefits, like trips abroad. Foreign funding creates massive competition over these scarce resources, which then complicates the movement-building process: it is in the interest of groups to maintain an individual identity, rather than collaborate with other groups and risk being overshadowed. The presence of scarce and valued resources also fosters jealousy. Women's groups that succeed in obtaining foreign grants are often accused of trying to monopolize or hoard their Western contacts. Mutual suspicion hampers cooperation between women's groups.
- Foreign resources can also play an influential role in setting movement priorities and tactics. Much of the money (especially at first) was given to Western organizations to manage on behalf of their Russian "partners." Foundations' priorities also condition the choices that women's groups make, when considering what projects might be fundable, and thus, which projects to submit for grants. For instance, activists in Russia tend not to work on women's rights candidates' political campaigns: funding for such work is less available than funds for activities that are not as overtly political. Funding has also been denied on occasion to openly homosexual groups.
- A social movement that is the beneficiary of substantial foreign funding may become accountable not to its own society, social group, or constituency, but rather, to one abroad. This has important ramifications for movement outreach strategies. Some activists in Moscow do outreach not to their own population but to their Western funders, and are thus perceived as being coopted or as not being indigenous. One contributing factor to this perception is that a number of activists conduct their work (including publications) in English. In their struggle to communicate with their income source, they have mastered and even directly adopted into the Russian language a number of English words, from "sexism" to "gender" and "women's studies." This use of English privileges certain activists while alienating them from other activists and from the rest of the population. Activists are not driven to develop an idiom in which to discuss women's oppression and discrimination with the average Russian woman. Faced with the given economic opportunity structure, membership-building is not their priority.
- International influences are important in shaping the Russian women's movement in a positive way as well. Many activists have begun to base their claims on international treaties and UN documents on women that Russia has signed (e.g. Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women). By making reference to such documents, activists lend a certain amount of legitimacy to their demands in the eyes of the Russian government. Russian women activists have also been able to legitimize themselves at home through attendance at international conferences, such as the UN's conference in Beijing in 1995. The participation of Russia's activist delegation at the Beijing conference was enabled by travel funding from foreign sources. Russia's activist delegation was far better prepared for the conference than the official government delegation that Russia sent, largely as a result of a series of seminars (also funded from abroad) that prepared the activists for the conference. The activists have benefited from increased respect by government officials since the conference.

Recommendations

How can the United States government and private foundations support social movements in Russia, while averting the problems that have accompanied such funding in the past? Grants could perhaps be restructured such that they would: 1) foster cooperation rather than competition between like-minded organizations; 2) be better tailored to fit conditions in today's Russia: for example, to help fund innovative fundraising techniques appropriate to post-totalitarian conditions; and 3) allow Russian women greater decisionmaking power over how the funds are spent.

Funding designed explicitly to foster cooperation between groups may be construed as imperialistic if it merely forces groups to collaborate. One way to avoid forced collaboration would be to fund multi-group initiatives (groups applying as a coalition to achieve a specific goal or set of goals), such as the Russian Association of Crisis Centers for Women. This might raise problems of accountability, but allowing coalitions of groups to propose their own financial accountability structure (a transparent one) might be a better solution than imposing hierarchy on a grant-receiving group. The latter strategy tends to build mistrust between activists, and to reinforce the aversion to hierarchy that accompanied popular reaction against Soviet rule.

Some of the animosity between activists could be avoided through a further opening of the granting process, specifically one that would allow more activists who have no mastery of English to apply for and receive grants written in their native tongue. This would help to counteract the "nomenklaturization" of social movements, where a bureaucratic elite of well-known activists becomes privileged. It is similarly important for US government agencies and other sources of funding to maintain transparent selection processes in their grant competitions. This reduces concerns about favoritism. Whenever possible, Russian activists should themselves be empowered to decide upon the distribution of funds. One such process was utilized by the US-NIS Consortium, a coalition of women's organizations that held competitions (with foreign funding) under which a rotating group of local women chose the grant recipients.

Another means of counteracting problems with the post-Soviet economic infrastructure would be to fund projects helping Russian social movement organizations to raise money domestically. Rather than parachuting in NGO specialists to give seminars on NGO management techniques that are inappropriate to the political and economic context of Russia, grants could instead fund programs to find technologically appropriate means of fundraising. For example, programs could be started to fund donations to organizations through the post office (the means by which people in Russia subscribe to journals and newspapers). Rather than trying to create Russian NGOs in the image of Western NGOs, funds could be used to help Russian activists develop their own organizational style that reflects the post-totalitarian context in which they work. Optimally, the funding would not enforce hierarchical forms of organization, and would teach collective accountability.

Movement groups could benefit from funding designed to increase access to email and the world wide web. Electronic communication enables like-minded activists to hear about each other, to network, and to create joint initiatives, thus contributing to movement building. Email facilitates rapid communication in an otherwise limited communications environment. It has also helped

increase the fairness of the granting process. Email is particularly important as a means of starting to equalize funding distribution to activists in Russian cities other than Moscow: it has allowed for activists in all areas of Russia to hear about grant opportunities simultaneously. Also, groups that do not have fax access and cannot rely on Russia's postal service could apply for such grants via email. Email also facilitates equal access to potential Western partners, as increasing numbers of activists and groups are hooked up to international networks and electronic conferences, some of which are now conducted in both English and Russian.

Finally, funding for Russian-language publications on women's issues and the women's movement would also be useful as a means of transforming consciousness, helping to further indigenize the movement, linking its adherents to each other, and familiarizing the broader population with democratic ideas about equal rights and equal opportunities under law.

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