

Promoting Activism or Professionalism in Russia's Civil Society?

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Most scholars and development professionals agree that a stable democracy requires a strong civil society. For this reason, many assistance agencies rightfully have made promoting civil society a key objective in Russia and other post-communist countries. The task is a daunting one. The experience of enforced activism under the communist regime has left most Russians deeply suspicious of public organizations. The government has not made things easier with complicated and often hostile laws and tax codes regulating public associations and charitable giving. The organizations that do exist, therefore, are often small, dubious organizations unlikely to survive the enthusiasm of their leaders.

In recent years, USAID has changed its strategy to promote civil society: it has phased out small seed grants in favor of larger grants to create resource centers, improve the legal environment and encourage indigenous philanthropy in the form of community foundations. This new strategy will help preserve a viable third sector as Western assistance diminishes, but it will do so from above, without creating a base of popular support, thereby diminishing its long-term contribution to building a sustainable elective government in Russia.

The new strategy reflects a tendency throughout the assistance community to treat the terms "civil society" and the "third sector" as synonyms, despite a crucial distinction between the two. Civil society refers to an overlapping network of civic associations that binds a population into a society autonomous of the state. As Robert Putnam has argued, civic association has internal and external consequences. Internally, such associations instill habits of cooperation, solidarity, public-spiritedness and respect for legitimate authority. Externally, such networks aggregate interests and articulate demands to ensure the government's accountability to its citizens. The third sector is an integral part of civil society but is not identical to it. Whereas civil society encompasses all formal and informal associations, including bowling leagues and bridge clubs as well as interest groups and charitable organizations, the third sector refers more specifically to the formal, functionally differentiated and frequently professional non-profit organizations that interact with state and market actors. The third sector performs civil society's external functions of aggregating interests, pressuring and monitoring the state, but it contributes little to its internal functions.

If the third sector does not emerge from society, the professionals of the third sector can act independently of the state only with outside assistance. This diminishes their ability to put forward the authentic interests of the population rather than pursue priorities defined in Washington or New York and hinders their ability to monitor the government. A lack of popular support also makes them vulnerable to suppression or co-optation by the state. In the first case, the state could portray third sectors as agents of a foreign government and diminish their legitimacy. In the case of co-optation, the professionals become effective administrators with good contacts used to good pay and status. If Western assistance diminishes and there are no resources coming from a popular base, the new activist-professionals will find that only the business and, particularly in Russia, the state sectors can provide them the resources to preserve their position. Rather than serving as an anchor for a stable democracy, then, a third sector divorced from society can be easily washed away by changing political currents either in Russia or in donor countries.

The USAID Strategy

In many respects, the shift in USAID strategy makes sense. Many if not most Russian NGOs do not have the capacity to use Western assistance effectively. The emphasis on resource centers is intended to encourage strong, experienced Russian organizations to assist weaker ones in their region or sector. Such help would include providing training and consulting on administrative, legal and financial issues; maintaining a database of regional NGOs and encouraging communication between organizations; and providing a meeting space and Internet access to organizations that have neither. Such a strategy costs less and is easier to administer than offering seed grants, and it is hoped that the resource centers will have a multiplier effect on other local organizations. Also, it is hoped that an infrastructure of competent professionals and community foundations will enable the third sector to survive even when Western assistance is reduced. Unfortunately, the strategy does not encourage grantees to mobilize popular support for the third sector; it rewards efficiency over participation and accountability, and it concentrates assistance funds in the hands of a small cadre of third sector professionals with their own values, their own networks and even their own language.

First, assistance to resource centers does not necessarily encourage either the initiative or the norms of cooperation and public spiritedness cited by Putnam as the internal effects of civic association. The resource centers themselves are small, centralized, hierarchical organizations consisting of a director and a small staff to keep the books, do the typing, manage the office and perhaps oversee different elements of the task as a whole. Many of these workers may not share the director's concern for the organization's social mission but regard it as employment. Gradually, the organization itself becomes a corporate entity pursuing its own survival over its original mission. In most cases, the director had decisive influence over organizational policy, and there is little attention to questions of governance within the organization itself to encourage participation. The attitude of other NGO activists toward resource centers in their region are mixed: some are enthusiastic about the services provided by the center; others, particularly members of grassroots

organizations, complain that resource centers hold a monopoly on information and external assistance in the region.

Most importantly, the resource centers usually work only with the small number of existing organizational leaders, helping to increase their professionalism, but doing little to attract the population as a whole into public activism. Finally, the training and advice provided by resource centers are often based upon a model of public organizations found in the West. Therefore, training sessions tend to emphasize general, abstract topics such as "strategic planning," "capacity-building" and "image" without grounding them in the specific challenges and opportunities of the Russian environment. For example, I have heard of several cases in which courses for "fundraising" were limited to teaching organizations how to apply for Western grants. As a result, trainees learn the language that allows them to speak to other third sector professionals but not necessarily the techniques to mobilize new constituencies.

The strategy to elicit indigenous philanthropy suffers from the same problem of focusing on existing elites without encouraging more general activism. The program foresees the creation of community foundations to attract contributions from government and business and to distribute grants to small projects in the community. Under existing circumstances such a strategy may be the most practical available to ensure that a third sector survives the reduction of Western assistance. Again, however, it centralizes the collection and disbursal of philanthropy in a few hands and leaves the third sector highly vulnerable to changes in the political climate.

Recommendations

Given diminishing appropriations to fund civil society promotion in Russia, USAID has chosen a strategy to encourage third sector professionalism over civil society activism to create an infrastructure of autonomous organizations less dependent on Western assistance. The strategy recognizes the practical limits of Western assistance on grassroots activism in a hostile social, legal and political environment but creates a danger of widening the distance between the third sector and the population, making Russia's small and fragile NGOs more vulnerable to changing political currents.

The most important recommendation is not to reduce government funding to this crucial program. A strong civil society should be the core focus of US assistance to Russia if its interest is to promote a stable market democracy there. The recent crisis demonstrates dramatically that institutional changes such as competitive elections and privatization at the upper reaches of the state are simply superficial trappings of market democracy unless they are built on the foundations of a strong civil society.

If appropriations are not increased, the emphasis on building an infrastructure of third sector organizations makes sense, particularly the introduction of community foundations to provide indigenous philanthropy. But this emphasis should not replace efforts to

mobilize broader popular support and respect for public activism in Russia. Below are four recommendations to promote civil society in addition to the third sector.

- *Decentralize funding.* The fact that access to Western assistance is concentrated in a few hands, usually in hands that speak English, increases bitterness and suspicion among activists that Western aid goes only to those with personal contacts in the West. Continuing to fund seed grant programs, even if in smaller numbers, will diminish such suspicions within the public realm while providing an alternative source of funding for organizations that cannot get support from local governmental and business leaders.
- *Emphasize governance.* To ensure greater participation and instill the habits of cooperation and responsibility so crucial to civil society, it is important that donors begin to consider organizational governance as an important criterion for evaluating grant proposals. A step in the right direction is the growing concern that Russian recipients of Western assistance create a board of directors. Perhaps more important are participatory models that ensure that organizational members, too, have some voice in deciding organizational policy.
- *Emphasize practical projects.* In addition to funding organizations helping other organizations, more money should be made available to organizations working directly with the population for immediate, tangible, practical improvements in their lives. Among women's organizations, for example, the Committee of Soldiers' Mothers and the growing network of domestic abuse hot lines and crisis centers have shown a remarkable ability to enlist public support precisely because they offer concrete, practical services to their constituencies. In other areas, USAID might offer more direct assistance to organizations providing affordable housing or promoting neighborhood self-management councils. Ideally, Western funding agencies would consult with Russians directly regarding the priorities for such activities, but this is not essential, as the success of domestic abuse crisis centers demonstrates.
- *Encourage collaboration.* Some of the most successful examples of foreign assistance encourage collaboration between organizations in Russia and the United States or Western Europe on specific problems facing a given constituency. Such collaboration provides Russian NGOs with practical training that is firmly rooted in the specific circumstances of their environment. One of the most successful grants to the women's NGOs, for example, has been the creation of the US-NIS Consortium of Women's Non-Governmental Organizations, particularly under the leadership of American Martina Vandenberg, who worked explicitly to forge coalitions among different segments of the Russian women's movements. In Nizhnii Novgorod, a Russian NGO administered a survey of foreign assistance to environmental organizations in the Volga Basin and found that the most successful project was a collaboration between the Russian organization "We Help the River" and a Dutch environmental organization to monitor pollutants in the Volga.