

The Case for Assisting Russian NGOs

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The last year has not been a happy one for Russian non-governmental organizations (NGOs). The government has forced them to undergo an expensive process of re-registration, introduced legislation that would curtail many NGOs' tax advantages, and stepped up a campaign to harass environmental organizations challenging federal policies, particularly with regard to nuclear waste and energy. To make matters worse, US and European foreign assistance to the Russian Third (or non-profit) Sector has declined substantially. On the part of the United States, this is shortsighted. Assistance to Russian NGOs remains one of the most promising--and one of the least expensive--expenditures for foreign policy possible.

Many believe previous support to Russian NGOs has not been very effective. As a recent report on democracy assistance to Eurasia* funded by the Carnegie Corporation of New York points out, however, this belief stems in large part from inflated expectations. At their height, allocations for democracy assistance to Russia amounted to a small fraction of the funds available to assist privatization and other market-oriented reforms. Also, the largest allocations were made during the early 1990s, when the capacity of Russian NGOs to absorb such funding was still quite small. Ironically, now that the capacity is greater, funding is reduced. Third, the hope that outside assistance could build a civil society in Russia was unrealistic from the outset. Western assistance can only help activists create formal organizations of the Third Sector; the habits and attitudes conducive to the creation of informal associations typical of a developed civil society must come from within. Given the legacy of an all-pervasive state apparatus and the subsequent distaste many Russians have for politics in general, such a stratum of informal associations was unlikely to emerge very quickly.

What democratic assistance has been able to do, however, has been to create an infrastructure of organizations and a network of skilled and active Third Sector professionals that provide a conduit for new ideas into Russia and, most importantly, afford concerned citizens one of their very few opportunities to organize and act in the public realm independently of the state. As an added bonus, because assistance to NGOs does not entail the concentration of funds awarded to larger projects, there is less opportunity for large-scale corruption.

Given Putin's current emphasis on creating a "dictatorship of laws" dominated by state institutions, the preservation of this nucleus of autonomous social action is even more critical. If Putin's vision translates into a more authoritarian state, as many fear it does, an infrastructure of autonomous organizations will provide a refuge where independent

thinkers can await more favorable conditions. For example, under the Tsarist regime, when the state suppressed all overtly political associations not sanctioned by the state, charitable organizations served as an incubator for reformist ideas and activists that would later join a variety of liberal social movements once control was loosened after 1905.

If Putin's presidency does not lead to authoritarianism, the Third Sector will continue to provide a conduit for new ideas, widening the sphere of independent activism. Moreover, the skilled administrators coming out of the Third Sector represent an excellent recruiting pool for more efficient governmental institutions. In a few cases, the alliance between government officials and NGOs can even assist in the strengthening of the state in a way that ensures accountability.

The Importance of Autonomy from the State

In discussing the obstacles that the state places before successful reform, most analysts refer to corruption and the subsequent inability of the government to enforce coherent policies. They mention less the extent to which state institutions continue to control access to most social resources, particularly in the regions. In other words, a person's surest and often only way to wealth and respect in Russia's regions remains his or her connections to government officials. As a result, federal and regional officials know that few people have the independent means to effectively challenge governmental actions, and so can act without regard to Russian society as a whole. Obviously, this is one reason why corruption is so rampant. Even local elections, which have ensured some governmental accountability for some officials at some times, are dominated by the resources controlled by state officials; for the most part, local electoral politics are best characterized as patronage machines run by local notables. Putin's political organization Edinstvo, for example--to the extent that it is a political party at all--is essentially a party of bureaucrats.

If Putin succeeds in making governmental structures more accountable to the Kremlin, therefore, he still will not--and indeed cannot--make them more accountable to the people. This can happen only if local social organizations have access to resources independently from the state. And, as noted, one of the few public arenas where citizens can organize effectively while remaining independent of the state has been within the Russian Third Sector.

Policy Advocacy and Monitoring: Strengthening the State from Below

In addition to providing a sphere of activity independent of the state, assisting Russian NGOs, and particularly NGOs involved in policy advocacy, can actually help strengthen the state in a way that is more accountable to Russian society. Of course, not all forms of policy advocacy have equal success. As the Carnegie Report mentioned above points out, advocacy groups are most effective when they are responding to demands that emerge from within society than when they mold their agenda to fit Western priorities. Among

women's organizations, for example, the Committee of Soldiers' Mothers, which, in addition to its celebrated opposition to both Chechen wars, seeks to protect individual draftees from abuse within the military, has had enormous success in mobilizing domestic support. Groups promoting reproductive rights or fighting the trafficking in women--issues often emphasized by Western donors--generally have not been so successful.

The impact of advocacy groups that lobby to influence legislation has also been disappointing. Whereas lobbying is one of the more effective forms of policy advocacy in the United States, the Russian Duma has relatively little power and the government often lacks the will or capacity to enforce effectively the legislation that is passed. At best, efforts to sway legislative outcomes train activists who then can become effective members of the government itself.

The most effective strategy of policy advocacy, but also the most vulnerable, is to monitor governmental bodies and private enterprises to ensure they comply with existing laws and regulations. Some of the most effective policy advocacy groups in Russia's Third Sector, for example, are the human rights organizations that publicize the violation of constitutional protections and also negotiate with prison officials and local law enforcement bodies to observe existing laws. Similarly, the legal advocacy of groups like Ecojuris, which brings enterprises and even governmental bodies to court when they violate environmental regulations, not only promotes the observance of existing law but also may enhance the prestige of the courts as a venue to arbitrate disputes.

Monitoring groups need not work in opposition to the state. They may find allies within governmental bureaucracies who have an equal interest in ensuring compliance to laws and regulations. The efforts of the Committee of Soldiers' Mothers to prevent the arbitrary abuse of draftees, for example, have found a sympathetic hearing among many local commanders interested in promoting the professionalization of discipline within the armed forces.

In one of the most effective strategies of policy advocacy, some women's groups have worked directly with law enforcement agencies to educate local police about recognizing and preventing domestic abuse and the trafficking in women. Though in these cases it is often difficult to find a willing partner within the official agencies--in Yekaterinberg, for example, the director of the local crisis center against domestic abuse spent many months persuading the local police chief that this was an important issue--such partnerships that do arise contribute both to a more effective and a more accountable state.

Conclusion

Despite dwindling resources and an increasingly hostile political environment, the small but active Third Sector continues to represent an important force for the creation of a stable, accountable, democratic government in Russia. It is also one of the few avenues left through which US foreign assistance can affect positive political change in Russia, particularly over the long term, and it can do so at relatively low cost. If the Putin era

leads to renewed authoritarianism in Russia, US assistance to the Russian Third Sector, even to relatively apolitical (and therefore less objectionable) organizations providing health and welfare services, can serve as an institutional haven where independent thinkers can engage in public action autonomously from the state. Such a nucleus of independent thought could then provide a base for democratic action once the political context changes. If authoritarianism is not in Russia's future, then the Third Sector can continue to do as it has been doing: serve as a conduit for new ideas; provide a pool of trained professionals that might be recruited into governmental institutions; and work with (or possibly against) local officials to ensure better enforcement of existing laws in a way that is accountable to Russian society.

In short, though assistance to Russian NGOs is unlikely to result in any dramatically visible changes in the near term, in the long term it constitutes the best investment for US foreign assistance dollars.

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