

U.S. Assistance to Russian NGOs: Securing Global Governance from Below

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This memorandum argues that President George W. Bush's administration should complement its diplomatic rapprochement with Russia with continued, even enhanced, support for nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in the Russian Third Sector.

Improved relations between Moscow and Washington have been one of the fortunate byproducts of the September 11 terrorist attacks on the United States. The crisis has pushed the Bush administration to acknowledge Russia's continuing importance to a stable world order. President Vladimir Putin, for his part, has responded by making a clear commitment to participating in "Western" efforts at global governance, even though powerful interests in Russia still doubt the wisdom of this move.

If this rapprochement between the two heads of state is to develop into a fuller and more predictable partnership between Russia and the North Atlantic community institutional patterns of cooperation and trust toward the West must be embedded more deeply into many levels of Russian society. U.S. efforts to help foster a vigorous Third Sector in Russia will accelerate the creation of such ties.

Putin, the Russian State, and NGOs

As many students of Russian politics have observed, Putin's guiding political philosophy has not been liberalism, socialism, or even nationalism, but *gosudarstvennost* (which, lacking a better translation, I will refer to as statism). This philosophy has deep roots in Russian history. In contrast to the pluralist vision of the state that is implicit in U.S. institutions, which holds that the state is an extension of society and a forum for political competition among different social groups, *gosudarstvennost* sees the state as a separate entity, a manifestation of the will of the entire nation. In this view, the state must provide a legal framework for the citizenry to work out social conflicts in a peaceful and predictable manner, but the state itself must remain aloof from partisan politics and manage society (from above) in the interests of the whole. The interests of the state are separate from and must take precedence over popular concerns.

In accordance with this philosophy, Putin has taken steps to reduce state corruption and render the Russian legal framework and other governmental institutions more rational, more effective, more efficient, and more consistent. Such steps have contributed to a sense of stability and optimism that has made Russia a more attractive place for foreign and domestic investment. Unfortunately, his administration has also taken steps to eliminate or harass independent media outlets, environmental activists and human rights groups that have criticized Putin's policies and supposedly threatened the interests of the state. In the long term, in fact, Putin's *gosudarstvennost* holds many dangers for continued reform. First, any state operating under principles of *gosudarstvennost* must rely on the wisdom, the political acumen, and the stability of its leaders. No matter how stable or routine a particular set of laws and regulations may appear under one president, the next chief executive will always have enough levers of power to alter, disrupt, or ignore these arrangements to pursue his or her own agenda. More importantly, the absence of any independent voice monitoring state behavior essentially leaves provincial bureaucracies to supervise themselves. Paradoxically, the theoretical exaltation of the state often has the practical effect of diminishing the central government's real power over provincial bureaucracies. An effective leader under these circumstances must resort to harsher and harsher methods of control to insure discipline, leading to the myth that Russia needs a strong leader to survive. In fact, Russia does not need a strong leader; all it needs are accountable bureaucrats.

Putin's rhetoric at the Civic Forum held in the Kremlin on November 21–22, 2001, suggests that he has come to recognize some of these problems. The Civic Forum, which Putin adviser Gleb Pavlovsky and his Foundation for Efficient Politics organized, convened more than 5,000 NGO representatives for discussions with members of Putin's administration. NGO activists' initial response to this meeting when it was announced last summer was skeptical: most believed that it was a preemptive ploy to capture or to channel NGO activity in the state's interests before it became a significant force on its own. In this view, the Kremlin was prompted to organize the Civic Forum by concern that Berezovsky's Foundation for Civic Freedoms would provide NGOs with significant resources for effective opposition, as well as by its surprise at the remarkable success of environmental activists in gathering 2.5 million signatures calling for a referendum to ban the importation of radioactive waste (a petition that federal officials then cynically squashed). The skeptics also viewed the Civic Forum as a superficial response to pressures from outside Russia, particularly Germany, to include NGOs in the political process.

Yet the meeting itself held out some hope for optimism. First, the participants in the Civic Forum were not simply tame NGOs that would respond gratefully to Putin's attention, but also representatives of organizations that had been very critical of Putin in the past, including the Committee of Soldiers' Mothers and the Moscow Helsinki Watch. Second, Putin himself acknowledged in his opening speech that "civil society cannot be established at the state's initiative, at the state's will, much less in accordance with the state's plans," and that "attempts to form civil society in this manner unproductive, impossible, and even dangerous." Prime Minister Mikhail Kasyanov offered similar remarks at the meeting's close. Dialogue between authorities and society, he said, "is becoming critically important for the program of reforms being carried out by the president and the government," and he encouraged NGOs to "spur on" the government to implement efficient reforms.

As a result, many activists were cautiously optimistic. According to human rights activist Valentin Gefter, "Putin lacks the administrative resource. He has come for support. He wants us to put state officials under pressure." Still, the extent to which Putin's efforts to enlist societal

support for his own programs will lead him to tolerate and acknowledge independent action in opposition to those policies remains unclear. After all, the referendum on the importation of nuclear waste never did take place.

Whatever Putin's intentions, this clearly is a crucial time for the continuing development of Russia's NGO community. While the state was weak, the Third Sector was also weak, simply because it was never clear who NGO activists could negotiate with, and what, if anything, could be implemented even if an agreement was reached. The creation of a more effective state provides the activists with more hope that negotiated agreements will be carried out. For whatever reason, Putin has decided he needs NGOs to continue his reforms, and this too may embolden NGO activists to make their demands more aggressively.

The United States should not let this opportunity pass.

Why Should the United States Care?

The stakes for the United States in fostering an independent Third Sector in Russia are clear. Given Russia's strategic position in Eurasia, its natural resources, its nuclear arsenal, and its material and human resources for the creation of weapons of mass destruction, no plan for global security can succeed without the participation of a stable, effective, and cooperative Russian state. The practice of previous administrations to rely heavily on personal relationships between leaders has proven unequal to the task, yet the lack of an independent sector has left U.S. presidents with few other choices. A consistent, sustained Russian contribution to global governance requires that adherence to multilateral international norms become part of the institutional routines at all levels of government. This is particularly true now, when global governance with respect to the environment, the control of infectious diseases, the security of sensitive materials, and the observation of human rights depends not simply on the actions of central governments, but also on the compliance of local officials. To some extent, such institutional practices can be fostered and monitored by expanding Russia's relations with NATO or including Russia in the World Trade Organization and other multilateral institutions. However it can be accomplished more quickly and effectively if a body of independent organizations is also working toward similar goals. Recent studies in the implementation of international environmental agreements, for example, have shown that such agreements are most effective when vigorous NGO activity to pressure governments to monitor compliance and to deepen cooperation in later rounds complements them.

What Can the United States Do?

Explaining why a more vigorous Third Sector in Russia would be in U.S. interests is all very well. Proposing what the United States can do to promote such activism is much more difficult. Putin has acknowledged that civil society cannot be created from above. Even less can it be created from the outside. Western funding of activist groups cannot extend beyond a rather thin stratum of organizations registered with the state. It cannot foster directly the kind of informal networks so necessary to a vigorous civil society or a successful social movement. Inevitably, a disproportionate amount of such funding goes to members of the professional or academic classes with a good knowledge of U.S. or West European languages and cultures. There is always a danger that these elites may capture foreign assistance monies for pursuing their own agenda. On the other hand, efforts to ensure greater accountability often force local activists to

spend more time and energy meeting donors' demands rather than local needs. Finally, activists' dependence on outside funding often exposes them to charges that they are in the pay of foreign governments that are against the interests of the state. Putin has repeatedly made this argument to justify his harassment of activist organization, and at least one activist in the Committee of Soldiers' Mothers told me the fear of such accusations had influenced his organization's decision to engage in fewer public demonstrations against government policy.

On the other hand, the United States definitely can and should be doing some things. First, it should not let the improvement of diplomatic relations between the two governments diminish pressure on the Putin administration to expand the role of NGOs in the political process. In an interview just prior to the convening of the Civic Forum, Grigory Yavlinsky claimed that the meeting was designed simply to improve Putin's image abroad: "If the initiators of this PR action had come to the president with their idea after September 11, I am sure he would advise them not to bother with trifles." U.S. policy should prove Yavlinsky wrong by communicating to Russian government officials that good governance and the enlistment of civil society remains an important consideration in continuing cooperation.

Second, foreign assistance to Russian activist groups, for all its problems, remains crucial to maintaining a truly independent space for political activism in Russian society. State structures continue to claim most of the country's resources, such that very little is available to groups seeking to engage in political advocacy without state support. For the most part, organizations that depend neither on government nor outside funding remain very small, often work out of private apartments, depend heavily on the enthusiasm of one or two activists, and generally cannot sustain their activities or links with other organizations over the longer term. With all its problems, foreign funding can provide an infrastructure of professional, sustainable organizations that can arrange conferences and distribute information sufficient to keep such smaller groups connected with a wider group of people like themselves without the state as an intermediary.

In general, foreign-funded organizations have not been very successful at mobilizing the kind of public support or at fostering the kind of dense informal networks necessary to sustain a social movement. They have been very successful, however, in collecting and distributing the kind of information necessary to help keep local bureaucracies accountable. This type of work does not need widespread popular support or intragroup solidarity. It requires only that activists have the necessary expertise, the time to do research, and the means to distribute their findings, including a computer, a fax, and perhaps a printing press. The professionals who receive much of this foreign funding usually have some sort of expertise already, and money can buy the rest. The environmental group Eco-Juris, for example, consists of a group of lawyers that, with foreign assistance, has had considerable success in forcing local businesses and governmental officials to comply with environmental laws.

In addition to maintaining political pressure on the Putin government from the top, the U.S. government should increase existing funding toward NGOs within Russia, with particular attention to organizations that aim to monitor local compliance with existing laws and international norms. Such spending remains the best investment possible toward creating genuine global security for the twenty-first century.