

## Kremlin Nationalism versus Russia's NGOs

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### Abstract

Since his second term as president, Vladimir Putin has sought to discredit the handful of Russian independent non-governmental organizations that deal with sensitive topics by branding them as servants of foreign sponsors who undermine Russian sovereignty and national interests. While the campaign has varied in intensity over time, it remains a constant theme of regime politics. These efforts serve the primary goal of blocking the rise of an alternative to the incumbent authorities, but have stunted the development of Russian civil society and damaged Russia's international image.

### Fear of an Alternative Source of Power

In order to ensure their survival, authoritarian regimes work to guarantee that no alternative base of political power emerges in their societies. Upon coming to power, Vladimir Putin and his collaborators quickly eliminated any potential threats that emanated from independent media, regional leaders, the oligarchs, and non-cooperative political parties.

Having weakened the political influence of these groups, the Kremlin set its sights on non-governmental organizations (NGOs) addressing issues that the regime considered potentially threatening to its survival. Ukraine's Orange Revolution in December 2004 is often seen as a turning point in the Kremlin's campaign against Russia's NGOs because the Kremlin interpreted the uprising in its neighbor as driven by Western-financed NGOs. But even before that event Putin was sounding the alarm about the nature of independent groups operating in Russian society. In his annual address to the Russian parliament on May 26, 2004, Putin had already begun to emphasize the themes that he would rely on for the next decade: NGOs were funded by foreign sources and were pursuing the interests of those foreigners in ways that, he implied, undermined Russian sovereignty and contradicted Russia's national interest. He said,

"In our country, there are thousands of public associations and unions that work constructively. But not all of the organizations are oriented towards standing up for people's real interests. For some of them, the priority is to receive financing from influential foreign foundations. Others serve dubious group and commercial interests. And the most serious problems of the country and its citizens remain unnoticed."<sup>1</sup>

Putin noted in 2004 that these problems are "unavoidable and of a temporary nature" and he did not want to criticize all of civil society. In his concep-

tion of proper state-society relations, civil society should perform the functions "the state should not or is unable to perform effectively." In other words, NGOs should deal with social issues, such as caring for orphans, while steering far clear of topics that could potentially undermine the ability of the current elites to hold on to their positions of power and wealth.

Such statements are meant to warn people away from becoming involved in political life. Putin's threats fall on fertile soil in Russia. The Soviet-era Communist Party monopoly on power left a legacy in which there was little tradition of joining groups, volunteerism, or activism for personal reasons or genuine interest. The features of Soviet life that most closely resembled such activity, membership in the Komsomol or *subotniki*, were typically coerced and seen as "political" since the goal was to support the Party. Today many people remain apathetic, believing that ordinary individuals have little ability to change anything anyway.

### The Orange Revolution and Beyond

Even though the pressure on NGOs had begun earlier, the Orange Revolution served to intensify Kremlin action against social organizations. A strict new law on foreign and domestic NGOs went into effect on April 18, 2006. This law required NGOs to supply extensive amounts of information to the authorities and go through a complicated re-registration process. It roused considerable protest from groups working in Russia at the time.

Russia's dependent courts also provided the regime with a useful tool against citizen activism—filing complicated cases, that are frequently spurious or trumped up, against NGO leaders forced them to spend their time on trial defending themselves rather than engaging in civic activity. Even if they avoided the always present specter of jail, the loss of time in the courtroom and preparing their defense was costly in terms of what they could have been doing otherwise.

One trick of modern authoritarian regimes is to only vaguely define what they don't like. Since shortly after coming to power, Putin has repeatedly denounced

1 The Russian text is available here: <<http://www.regnum.ru/news/267244.html>> An English translation of the speech is available here: <[http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/library/report/2004/putin-federalassembly\\_2004.htm](http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/library/report/2004/putin-federalassembly_2004.htm)>.

NGOs for engaging in “political activities.” Such activities have included topics like election monitoring, human rights, Chechnya, police reform, corruption, but not only these. The point is that there is no bright red line between what is and is not allowed. The content of “political activity” depends on what the authorities decide at any given moment. The idea behind this approach is to outsource repression so that people effectively repress themselves. Activists who do not know exactly what the rules are will seek to protect their liberty by reducing the scope of their involvement in order to avoid the possibility of going to jail or being beaten by law enforcement officers. Such “self-policing” also helpfully saves resources for the elites who control the state. Moreover, ambiguity leaves the door open for abuse.

In Russia, there are few foundations or sources of funds besides the state that can help finance NGO activities. The lack of resources domestically, and the possibility of winning relatively large grants from abroad, drove some groups to seek foreign funding. Naturally, the priorities of the foreign funders did not always match the agenda of the local groups and, in some cases, the groups had to bend their proposals to meet the terms of the Western foundations. Before his arrest in 2003, Mikhail Khodorkovsky’s Open Russia Foundation began funding a variety of groups, but the oligarch’s imprisonment sent a strong signal to other wealthy Russians not to follow his example. Seeking to avoid a similar fate, prudent high-wealth Russians keep their money abroad. They don’t generally invest in charity unless directed to do so by powerful officials. Nevertheless, there are some signs of change. Anti-corruption blogger and politician Alexey Navalny and Olga Romanova, who founded Russia Behind Bars to defend businessmen imprisoned by opponents seeking to steal their property, have succeeded in convincing Russian citizens to contribute money to causes that they believe are worthy.

In addition to limiting domestic sources, the Kremlin also made it more difficult for foreign organizations to work in Russia, closing offices of the British Council in St. Petersburg and Yekaterinburg in 2007, leaving only one in Moscow. Additionally, Russia forced the U.S. Agency for International Development to stop its activities by October 1, 2012 and expelled the UN Children’s Fund (UNICEF) at the end of that year. USAID had spent nearly \$3 billion on aid and democracy programs over two decades in Russia. Many foreign donors lost their tax exempt status in 2008, including the International Red Cross, World Wildlife Fund, and the Ford Foundation.

By questioning the patriotism of the civil society groups, Putin signaled to regional leaders and tax collectors that they were a suitable target for repressive measures. Groups that the Kremlin does not like face

visits from the security police and regional authorities. Often they lose their leases and find it hard to rent space for their offices. In contrast to the U.S., where there are clear rules on what taxes non-profit corporations do and do not pay, Russian legislation is purposely confusing so that all groups are in violation of one provision or another at any given time. This legal complexity makes them vulnerable to prosecution.

It is rare for the Kremlin to actually shut down a NGO, but it happens. On October 13, 2006, a Nizhny Novgorod court shut the Russian-Chechen Friendship Society. The court ruled that the group’s leader Stanislav Dmitrievsky did not have a right to lead the organization because he had been convicted of “extremism” earlier in the year. In 2013, the authorities dissolved the vote monitoring agency Golos (discussed in detail below).

In addition to using repressive measures and creating an atmosphere of fear, the Kremlin has tried to coopt civil society groups. The Kremlin now provides considerable funding for grants that NGOs can win, including about \$258 million in the 2013 federal state budget. Naturally, the vast majority of the grants are directed to groups who are non-threatening to the political elite. In a situation where other sources of funding are scarce, controlling the purse strings means determining what kind of groups can exist. The Kremlin has also set up a variety of official institutions, such as the Civic Forum and Public Chamber, which are designed to make it easier for the state to control the work of the NGOs.

### New Repressive Measures

Protest activities began building in Russia in 2010, with a huge rally in Kaliningrad early in the year, reinvigorating the usually dormant Russian society. Most of the causes behind these actions were focused on local abuses of power, but the outbreak of such concerns across the country started to look like a growing trend. Other popular actions focused on the Khimki forest and the official abuse of flashing lights to cut through urban traffic jams. Discontent in the Far East also grew. These actions culminated in December 2011 and May 2012 with massive protests against Putin’s decision to replace Medvedev as president and election abuses in the parliamentary and presidential elections.

Putin, who had relied on the population’s passivity as a key element in maintaining power, opened his third presidential term with a major offensive to bring this spontaneous activity back under control. In July 2012, a new law returned to the well-worn discourse of accusing the NGOs of engaging in “political activity” at the bidding of foreign funders, now requiring all NGOs that accepted funding from abroad to register as “foreign agents.” The motive, as usual, was to discredit the

NGOs in the eyes of the public and therefore give the state more control over them. According to the text of the law, political activity includes seeking to change state policy and influencing public opinion with that aim, but the vagueness of that formulation gave the regime great discretion in determining whom to punish.

Given the vague nature of the law, the way that the authorities implemented it was key to determining its impact on Russia's NGOs. Initially, the Justice Ministry did not seem interested in enforcing the law and NGOs generally engaged in a campaign of civil disobedience by refusing to register as "foreign agents." But then Putin made it clear that he wanted to see action, telling the FSB leadership on February 14, 2013, that the NGO laws must be enforced. The Prosecutor's Office immediately began investigating hundreds of NGOs. Tax, fire, and labor inspectors also began paying visits to the organizations, looking for violations. On July 10, General Prosecutor Yurii Chaika told the Federation Council that he had identified 22 non-commercial organizations involved in political activity—"foreign agents"—in Russia.<sup>2</sup> He said that they had received more than 800 million rubles between 2010–13 according to their own record books. He claimed that the number of foreign agents in reality was much greater than he was able to identify because they used various means to disguise their work.

One of the clear targets of the campaign was Golos, which monitors elections and publicizes evidence of manipulations and fraud. In April 2013, the Justice Ministry declared that Golos had improperly failed to register as a foreign agent and then took the rare step of dissolving the organization on June 6, 2013. Its director fled the country. However, despite all this, members of the organization reestablished the group on July 5, 2013, set up a new web site (<<http://www.golosinfo.org/>>), and helped to monitor the Moscow September 2013 mayoral elections.

Despite the temporary closing of Golos, the campaign against "foreign agents" seemed to peter out by the end of the summer, after Putin had called for revisions in the law that would focus the attention of law enforcement agencies on political organizations while not causing trouble for groups that deal with social or healthcare issues.<sup>3</sup> What had seemed like an intense crackdown, suddenly lost steam, leaving the NGOs to continue working, but always in doubt about their ultimate fate.

In their evaluation of the first year of the law, the Institute for Contemporary Development's Yevgeniy Gontmakher claimed that it had harmed charity work

in Russia and undermined the authorities' prestige.<sup>4</sup> He noted, for example, that Aleksandr Zamaryanov, executive director of the Kostroma Center for the Support of Public Initiatives was fined 100,000 rubles (\$3,120) for inviting a foreign diplomat to a roundtable discussion and that the Muravyevka Park for Sustainable Development, which studies and protects rare cranes in the Far East, was declared a "foreign agent" for receiving a grant from abroad. These examples demonstrated the absurdity of the law.

Only when 30 people on a Greenpeace ship staged an assault on a Russian offshore Arctic oil drilling platform in September, did the Russian regime bare its teeth again. Security officers boarded the ship in international waters, arrested all on board, including journalists, and charged them with piracy. As of this writing, all were still in jail and had been denied bail, despite the protests of various Western governments and organizations. By attacking the source of Russia's future oil and implicitly questioning Russian sovereignty over the Arctic, the environmentalists had struck at Putin's most sensitive spot. Thanks to its harsh crackdown, Russia is going to pay a price in terms of its international reputation—coverage of protests around the world in support of the "Greenpeace 30" ran in tandem with the launch of the Sochi 2014 Olympic torch in Red Square and focused media attention on the environmental impact of developing resources in the Arctic, a subject energy companies would rather address in less prominent venues. Since the thirty crew members represent 18 countries, the bad press is likely to be global: Brazil's President Dilma Rousseff has already offered all support to free Brazilian activist Ana Paula Maciel.

### Russia's Resilient NGO Community

Not all problems for NGOs in Russia come from the state. Russian NGOs do not always do a good job of explaining to Russian citizens what they are doing or why it is necessary. Helping family and friends rather than organized groups remains the most popular form of charity in Russia. Furthermore, some NGOs are more interested in Western grants rather than local concerns. Groups in the capital cities of Moscow and St. Petersburg often have different interests and concerns than those in the regions. Overall, these voluntary organizations have yet to become a respected part of the country's social fabric.

Despite all the problems they face, most of Russia's well known NGOs continue to operate. Groups like Memorial, the Moscow Helsinki Group, Soldiers Mothers Committees, the Levada Center, Agora, Transparency International, and Bellona press on with their usual

2 <[http://genproc.gov.ru/smi/interview\\_and\\_appearances/appearances/83568/](http://genproc.gov.ru/smi/interview_and_appearances/appearances/83568/)>

3 <<http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/07/04/us-russia-ngos-putin-idUSBRE9630N920130704>>

4 <<http://www.kommersant.ru/doc/2310097?isSearch=True>>

activities. Moreover, less prominently, there are numerous groups involved in a variety of activities such as protecting the environment, defending historic buildings from demolition, ensuring workers' rights, and promoting various leisure and professional activities.

The Ministry of Justice's online database on October 15, 2013 included 225,211 registered non-commercial organizations (416,517 total records minus 191,306 which had been excluded) (<<http://unro.minjust.ru/NKOs.aspx>>). Unfortunately, there is no systematic data on which of these organizations are actually operating, what their activities are, how effectively they influence state policy or promote social change, questions that are complicated in any society.

#### *About the Author:*

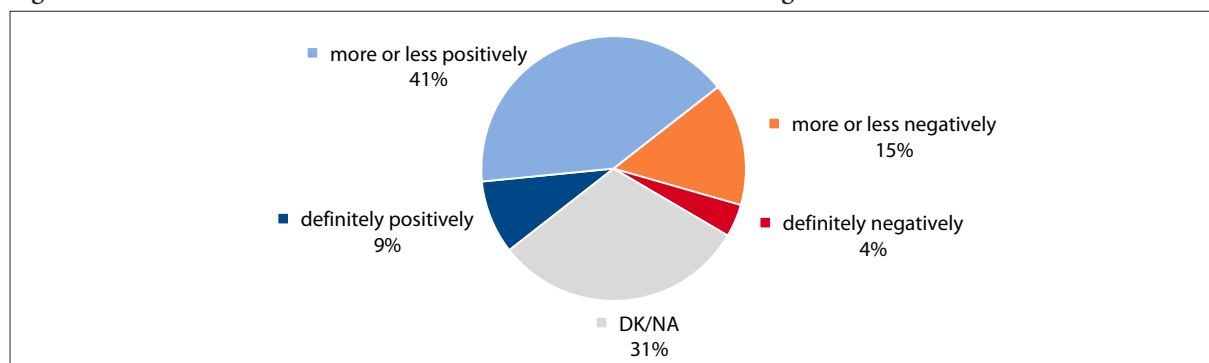
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#### *Recommended Reading*

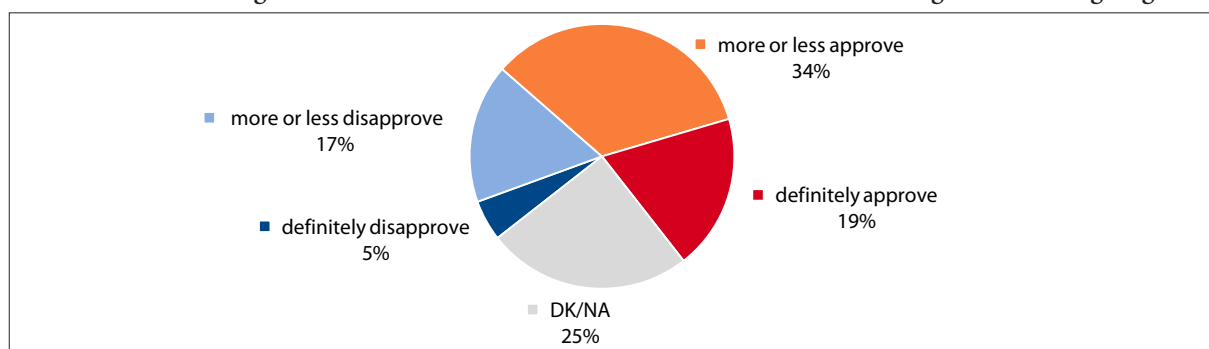
Miriam Lansky and Elspeth Suthers, "Putin versus Civil Society: Outlawing the Opposition," *Journal of Democracy* 24:3, July 2013.

Of course, it is hard to say how much activity the state repressive apparatus has prevented from happening. In some cases, individuals work together in organizations that never seek formal state registration. Volunteerism has been growing as ordinary people seek to help victims of the fires and floods that have afflicted Russia in recent years. Navalny's mayoral campaign in the summer of 2013 also sparked an enormous amount of grassroots activism, bringing a new generation of Muscovites into the political process even if the overall election was neither free nor fair. But given the harsh and unpredictable actions of the Putinist Kremlin against civil society, few new organizations are likely to launch activities in the near future.

**Figure 1: How Would You Rate the Activities of Non-Commercial Organizations in Russia?**



**Figure 2: Do You Approve of Harsh Sanctions, Including Liquidation of the Organization, Against Non-Commercial Organizations Which Receive Funds from Abroad But Do Not Register as "Foreign Agents"?**



Source: representative opinion poll by Levada Center, 20–24 June 2013, <<http://www.levada.ru/11-07-2013/otnoshenie-k-nko>>