



Assessing civil society in Putin's Russia: The plight of women's crisis centers

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ABSTRACT

The article assesses civil society in Putin's Russia through the lens of the small social movement working against gender violence. Based on questionnaires distributed to movement organizations in 2008–2009, we find significant retrenchment among the NGO segment of the movement, adding evidence to the claim of Russia's turn toward authoritarianism. However, this innovative, midlevel analysis—not the typical society-wide surveys nor the small number participant observation—also shows that the women's crisis center movement has made some in-roads in transforming the state, revealing that some democratic opportunities remain at the local level.

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One of the most controversial aspects of Putin's presidential administration was his exertion of control over nongovernmental organizations. While organizations favored by Putin were privileged, such as through the Public Chamber and increased public funding, the 2006 NGO law increased the power of the Justice Ministry to monitor NGOs not seen as supportive of Putin's power. The law stepped up the bureaucratic red tape for registration and requires NGOs to report on their foreign funding. In 2008, a presidential decree then removed tax-exempt status for some ninety percent of foreign NGOs and foundations operating in Russia, especially those that focused on human rights (Orttung, 2009). The increased regulations, in a country where regulations are often used coercively, has greatly increased the cost of operating an NGO, leaving as many as two-thirds of NGOs operating outside of the law (Orttung, 2008, 504). These measures were exacerbated by the regime's restrictions on the right to public protest and press autonomy. By the end of Putin's presidency in 2008, Freedom House assessed that Russia's civil society had become significantly more restricted, dropping from a score of 3.75 in 1999 (on a scale of 1–7 with 1 being the best) to 5.75 (Orttung, 2009). Most Western observers—following Putin's dominance over elections, the mass media, and the parliament—consider Russia illiberal and nondemocratic or at least heading in that direction.

An additional hurdle for Russia's civil society was the substantial reduction in the foreign funding that had been pumped into NGOs since the post-communist collapse. By 2005, some two billion dollars of so-called democracy assistance had been distributed to Russia since the collapse of the Soviet Union, perhaps ten percent of which went to NGOs (Sundstrom, 2006, pp. 12–13), but the “party” (such that it was) was over. In the new millennium, the European Union directed its funding to the European post-communist candidate/member countries, the United States to its new wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. In 2009, the Ford Foundation, a leading donor in the region, announced it was closing its Russia office because of the global economic downturn. In the early 1990s, Russia lacked experience with charitable giving and a viable economic

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infrastructure for giving donations and banking them (Sperling, 1999); in the 2000s, Russia had gained a frustration with fake NGOs, mini cults of personality that pilfered funding for self-serving interests or even diverted money into criminal organizations. Not just nationalistic protectionism, the NGO law at least partially reflected realistic concerns about these transgressions.

On the other hand, there were some hopeful signs for people living in Russia, at least until the 2008 global economic crisis. The ten-year economic boom, built on oil and foreign investment, made imports cheaper, making Russian citizens' salaries go much further. Putin chose to use the booming oil revenue to build up government reserves and then funnel some of the revenue into social welfare provision. While some Soviet-era benefits were monetized in 2005, the later Putin years has seen a new social contract in which people experienced increased wealth and better-funded social services in exchange for their support of Putin or at least as "rewards for behavior prioritized by the state" (Cook, 2011, abstract). People who felt that the contract was not being honored collectively organized for social rights, including issues such as special benefits for the elderly, environmentalism, urban planning, traffic rules, and others. And, sometimes they won.

This article is an evaluation of this period of Russia's civil society through the lens of one small movement, the women's crisis center movement. In the years since the Soviet Union's demise, some two hundred women's crisis centers advocating for women living with domestic and sexual violence have been established in Russia, as a part of the larger global women's movement against gender violence (Johnson, 2001, 2009). The first research objective is to examine the overall status of the women's crisis centers, especially the degree to which there has been retrenchment in mobilization, both in the movement as a whole as well as in the individual centers' health. By health, we refer to the crisis centers' "viability," "capacity," and "governance," categories that Sarah Henderson (2003, ch. 4) used more than a decade ago similarly to evaluate the status of Russia's civil society. Second, considering the drop in Western funding and the recent NGO regulations, we examine the differences between the NGO and the governmental crisis centers that have emerged in recent years. The end goal is to address the concern of Russian civil society observers that, "[b]eyond impressionistic anecdotes, there...is no way of knowing whether [civic] activity is increasing, decreasing, or staying the same" (Ortung, 2009). Similar to Suvi Salmenniemi's (2008) study, we find that Russia's organizations have created innovative ways of surviving within an inhospitable environment, but these ways are not likely sustainable.

A small movement in a time of uncertainty

After an initial burst of unguarded optimism, there has been a lot of criticism of NGOs in Russia. Into the new millennium, Russia's civil society remained weak (Howard, 2003); by 2009, even in the post-communist societies more activated, apathy had grown (Valkov, 2009). Much of the blame has been laid on foreign donors because the post-communist NGOs are required to "serve the interests of foreign donors more than those of the local population" (Henderson, 2002, p. 3). Even well-intentioned NGOs find themselves on a grant-seeking treadmill, pursuing short-term and easily quantifiable projects, but undermining the long-term goal of creating sustainable civil society (Hemment, 2004). Later studies, as the funding began to dry up, found that Putin's tendency to reward those organizations loyal to him suggested "a gloomy future" (Sundstrom and Henry, 2005, p. 319). The new environment only exacerbated the incentives for organizations to organize vertically (connecting to local and regional executive authorities), rather than horizontally (with other organizations), and to protect their own interests, rather than add to the broader social capital (Salmenniemi, 2008).

Within this context, the women's crisis center movement can be understood as a "small social movement," albeit there is no consensus on what such a "small" social movement is (Johnson, 2001). The movement was founded in the early 1990s, institutionalized the crisis center as the movement organization in the mid-1990s, and these centers proliferated up through the early to mid-2000s (Pashina, 2004; Johnson, 2009). In this case, much like other women's movements around the world (Sperling et al., 2001, 1155–86), the movement is professionalized, not mass-based, and rarely confrontational, but it is not without a kind of grassroots support from a small collection of locals. Some of these social movement organizations call themselves crisis centers—the defining characteristic being the provision of some kind of services (hotline or in-person) to survivors of gender violence—while others only work to raise awareness of violence against women without providing any services. For ease, we refer to all movement organizations as "crisis centers."

Not just constituted of NGOs, Russia's women's crisis center movement includes governmental (state and local) agencies. We make this unconventional claim for several reasons. First, the NGO crisis center leaders themselves include the governmental crisis centers, for example, in their umbrella organizations, probably a legacy of their belief that the government should take responsibility for social services. Further, the movement, with support from global allies, was responsible for the passage and implementation of a regulation from the *Russian Ministry of Labor and Social Development* (1999) that called for the establishment of these "complex centers for social services" that have responsibilities to "help women and children," "women in difficult life situations," and "victims of violence in the family" (Johnson, 2009). Third, there is not always even a clear distinction between NGOs and governmental agencies (Johnson, 2006, pp. 266–83; Kulmala, 2011). Some governmental centers have drawn upon volunteers and represented themselves as NGOs to solicit international grants. More rarely, some NGO women's crisis centers have ended up relying on significant governmental funding. For these reasons, we are extending the observation that many organizations in Russia are state-society hybrids (Wedel, 2001; Hrycak, 2006) to the level of the social movement.

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