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THE RUSSIAN ENVIRONMENTAL MOVEMENT,
FOREIGN AID, AND DEMOCRATIZATION***

Laura A. Henry



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***THE GREENING OF GRASSROOTS DEMOCRACY?
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I. Introduction

The fifteen former Soviet states have been engaged in a massive project to transform their political, economic, and social institutions over the past decade. Hoping to facilitate the transition from a single party state to a democracy, representatives of Western governments and transnational activists have flocked to the region, bringing with them expertise, resources, and their own political and social norms. Many of these foreign actors have framed their projects in terms of “strengthening civil society” in post-communist states and “encouraging democratization from below” through support for grassroots non-governmental organizations of all types. In light of these activities, political scientists have begun to consider more closely the degree to which external actors can facilitate and shape democratization in another country, particularly by fostering demand for democracy at the grassroots level.

This paper examines the influence of foreign aid on the development of the Russian non-governmental sector and investigates the dynamic interaction between activists from the Russian environmental movement and Western aid officials by considering three factors—resources, issue framing, and political opportunities. The often overlapping, but occasionally conflicting strategies, goals, and political orientations of Western donors and Russian activists have important implications, both positive and negative, for NGO legitimacy, autonomy, and sustainability. Without foreign funding, Russian NGOs would have a very difficult time continuing their activities. Ultimately, however, the desire of donors to quickly create Western style pluralism through support for NGOs also may subtly undermine these organizations’ ability to contribute to democratization in Russia.

II. Political Transition and International Donors: Choosing the NGO Model

In recent decades, Western officials—particularly those of the United States—have announced that promoting democracy in the post-communist region serves the vital national interest of their states. Thus democratization in other regions has become an explicit foreign policy goal. Shortly after taking office, the Clinton Administration identified “building sustainable democracies” as a priority of the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID). USAID documents offer justifications for this policy:

Democratic governments are more likely to advocate and observe international laws and to experience the kind of long-term stability that leads to sustained development, economic growth, and international trade. Countries that are experiencing economic growth and are actively engaged in trading relationships are less likely to engage in acts of war.¹

Once democratization became a priority, donors needed a strategy. They therefore turned to theories of how their own democracies developed, particularly to the work of Alexis de Tocqueville. Western aid donors have professed agreement with the Tocquevillean theory that societal associations contribute to a vibrant civil society through their ability to aggregate public opinion, articulate it to the relevant state officials, offer policy alternatives, and train the next generation of social and political leaders. They also have agreed that the development of a pluralistic civil society is an essential component of democratic consolidation.

While civil society is a complicated and much debated term, those who cite its positive characteristics often mention diverse social interactions—from soccer clubs to choirs to neighborhood associations (Putnam 1993). For the practical purpose of disbursing aid to promote the development of civil society, however, most Western aid donors have chosen to export a particular organizational form: Western-style non-governmental organizations (NGOs). The range of Russian organizations currently receiving foreign assistance includes professional associations, women’s rights organizations, business and labor federations, media watchdogs, environmental activist groups, and human rights monitoring organizations. Despite the diverse purposes of these groups, the NGO model is seen as a “one size fits all” form for achieving societal goals. The process of exporting this NGO model is obviously not as straightforward as simply imposing organizational forms, tactics, and goals. It would be more accurate to say that these organizational characteristics are not transferred, but adapted or translated by Russian groups in order to function in the post-communist context. This “indigenization” of Western models may influence both the NGOs’ current effectiveness in promoting societal change and their potential for survival and future development.²

¹ USAID Center for Democracy and Governance, “Democracy and Governance: A Conceptual Framework,” 1999, <http://www.usaid.gov/democracy/pubsindex.html>.

² This type of adaptation and influence does not move only from the West to the South and East. Although Western movements generally are analyzed in isolation in the social movement literature (i.e., a study of the German greens), we are beginning to see more frequent acknowledgement that non-Western movements have been dramatically influenced by their counterparts in advanced capitalist states. The next step, which is not addressed by this project, is to complete that feedback loop and examine the tactics and framing strategies imported by Western activists.

Judged by the increase in the total number of NGOs operating within the Russian Federation, as well as by the high percentage of those that have received Western support, donors' efforts to encourage the development of non-governmental organizations in Russia since the early 1990s have been quite successful. After the demise of many social organizations during the hyperinflation and economic decline of 1992-93, the number of Russian NGOs has rebounded. One foreign donor asserts that there are 60,000 NGOs in Russia now, and other estimates are even higher.³ More than 13,500 activists from non-governmental organizations have gone through the USAID-sponsored training program alone, and most Western European governments support similar programs, albeit on a smaller scale. Looking specifically at the green movement, Russian environmental groups clearly have increased in number, organizational capacity, and professionalism since the mid-1990s, and foreign aid has played a significant role in these increases. Based on surveys of green activists, Russian sociologists have argued that contacts between Russian environmental leaders and Westerners have increased ten times between 1991 and 1998, and that about 75 percent of the financial resources of Russian environmental NGOs now come from the West (Kouzmina and Yanitsky, 1999: 180).

Donors' apparent success in increasing the NGO population in Russia masks some troubling aspects of the sector's development, however. Some important and unintended consequences may have profound effects on the process of democratization at the grassroots level in Russia. For example, most environmental NGOs in Russia lack a membership base, are disconnected from the needs of local populations, and are reluctant to engage the government. While domestic factors certainly contribute to these weak patterns of organizational development, Russian NGOs' excessive reliance on donor funding, and the donors' ability to set strategies and goals for NGO development, may reinforce domestic pathologies or encourage other detrimental patterns in the NGO sector. In particular, foreign aid may jeopardize the autonomy of Russian organizations, their connection to their natural constituencies, and their legitimacy, subversive power, and sustainability. In short, Russian NGOs dependent on foreign aid may fail to fulfill the roles of intermediary civil society organizations—roles anticipated by donors—due in part to their reliance on the donors themselves.

³ Author interview, Moscow, April 21, 2000. The exact number is difficult to capture since many groups are registered but not currently active, while many others operate without registration.

III. The Influence of Donor Assistance on NGOs

As noted above, my analysis will be confined to one subset of Russian organizations, Russian environmental NGOs, and one type of international actor, foreign aid donors promoting the development of civil society and democratic consolidation in Russia through aid to non-governmental organizations. In addition to the changes in form, goals, and strategies that have accompanied green NGOs' reliance on foreign aid, the Russian environmental NGO sector offers particularly fertile ground for considering the ability of NGOs to promote democratization since the green movement played a historic role in mobilizing citizen protest and organizing demand for regime change in the late Soviet period (Dawson 1996).

The data for this analysis were drawn from interviews conducted in 1999 and 2000 with both Russian environmentalists and Western aid officials in six Russian cities (St. Petersburg, Vladivostok, Novosibirsk, Bryansk, Vladimir, and Moscow), surveys of the Russian press, and a review of Russian social science publications relating to the environmental movement. Three broad explanatory variables will be used to trace the interaction between foreign donors and Russian NGOs: the resources available for mobilization; the framing strategies that resonate with, and motivate, a population; and political opportunities for activism.⁴ These variables can be used to highlight the way international actors help to construct the incentive structure within which NGOs operate. Furthermore, since varying economic and political incentives can encourage different types of organizational form, behavior, and networks, foreign aid donors indirectly shape the evolution of domestic NGOs.⁵ In fact, as illustrated below, the incentives of donor resources, framing, and political opportunities often reinforce each other in producing similar patterns of organizational development and behavior in Russia.

⁴ These variables are broadly consistent with the political process model from social movement theory. See McAdam 1992, 1998; McAdam McCarthy, and Zald, 1996; and Guigni, McAdam, and Tilly, 1999.

⁵ While many of these opportunities and disincentives originate in domestic socio-economic and political features, in this paper I will focus primarily on the role of aid donors.

A. Resources

The most obvious contribution of foreign donors to Russian NGOs is the funding they provide through grant competitions.⁶ Foreign donors encourage the emulation and proliferation of the Western NGO model by financing particular projects and by demanding certain types of organizational forms (a board of directors, open membership, transparent decision-making) and financial accountability in return.⁷ Due to Russia's partial economic liberalization, including price increases and a relative decline in employment and wages, Russian NGOs often have difficulty securing reliable, domestic sources of funding, whether from the state, business, or private donations. In this resource poor context, it becomes possible for foreign aid donors to play an especially significant role in expanding the economic opportunities of NGOs and even in selecting which NGOs are most likely to survive the economic transition.

During the past five years, donors have overcome many of the obvious flaws in their early grant programs, which were widely criticized within the Russian activist community. For example, access to grant competitions has improved significantly since the early 1990s when most application materials were only available in English and most grants were given by the Moscow offices of Western foundations to Moscow-based organizations. Early grants also often required that Russian organizations collaborate with a Western counterpart, but these partners were difficult to find and often dominated the projects. Now funding may be channeled directly to Russian NGOs or through Russian sub-contractors, as opposed to early grant programs in which a significant amount of the funding went to support Western consultants and sub-contractors administering the programs. Now more local experts also are included in judging grants competitions.

Certain difficulties for Russian organizations receiving foreign aid persist, however, especially in regard to how money may be used by NGOs. For example, due to the emphasis on discrete projects in grant competitions, many Russian NGO leaders noted that it is difficult to get money for operating expenses and therefore difficult to retain staff and continue the

⁶ Note that in the political process model, the variable "resources" is generally construed more broadly than mere financial resources, but for reasons of brevity and because financial resources are by far the most visible contribution of donors, my analysis will be restricted to financial assistance.

⁷ Some observers have referred to this project-based NGO funding strategy as the "projectization" of civil society and critiqued it for focusing on just one element of NGO activity. See Sampson 1996.

organization's activity between grants. Some activists admit that this has led their group to conceal how they actually use the grant money and to exaggerate their financial need in grant applications in order to cover office expenses. In several cases, NGO representatives acknowledged that they had purchased a vehicle or computer, or paid a staff member's salary, with grant money even though it was designated for a specific project.⁸ They justified this by arguing that they continued to work on their grant-winning project throughout the grant period. Unrealistic restrictions on how the money will be used thus introduce an element of prevarication in the donor-recipient relationship. Other activists expressed frustration that they are able to obtain money to start projects, but not to continue them. Almost all interviewees stated that seminars and conferences are by far the easiest "projects" to obtain money for, but many agreed that seminars are also among the least productive activities in which they engage. Noting the cost of flying in foreign experts for seminars, some activists argued that the money would be better spent on small grants. Respondents were especially frustrated by seminars that encourage them to spend the day brainstorming possible future projects, only to announce later that there is no funding available for these projects. Activists from environmental groups focusing on scientific questions note that it is extremely difficult to get grant money for technology, on-going environmental monitoring, or other independent scientific activities that might buttress the environmentalists' policy preferences.

In addition, the receipt of grant money is not a cost-free option for Russian NGOs. A number of requirements related to accounting and reporting the use of funds are connected to foreign grants, and the organizations face significant pressure to mimic the structure of Western organizations. For many Russian NGOs, receiving a grant requires them to open a bank account, hire an accountant, and pay taxes for the first time—sometimes drawing unwanted attention from the state authorities. A St. Petersburg environmentalist argues that foreign funding "is a heavy burden on the NGO budget, both in terms of finance and time."⁹ NGO staff members often discover that Western organizational practices are not suited to their local setting. One Russian historian comments that former political prisoners, who often possess the social capital necessary to lead organizations, discover that their informal networks break down under the pressure of an imported Western business culture that requires specific skill sets and an impersonal style of

⁸ Information gathered in several author interviews.

⁹ Author interview, St. Petersburg, April 5, 1999.

management (Lurye 1998). Others expressed frustration with more informal obligations to donors. For example, hosting Western visitors and volunteers can take a significant amount of time and energy. The leader of a St. Petersburg NGO that is considered a model organization by donors noted that he spends almost half his time communicating with Western donors and Western NGO counterparts, contributing to donor reports and elucidating his group's relatively successful experience.¹⁰

While in the early 1990s donors tried to offer small grants to the greatest possible number of organizations, current grant programs have shifted to targeted assistance or to greater grant amounts for specific issue areas to NGOs that have successfully completed projects in the past. Each funding strategy has strengths and weaknesses. The way in which the first grant competitions were administered led to the proliferation of small groups and a competitive environment among green organizations. Groups were reluctant to cooperate for fear that in sharing information and projects they would lose their comparative advantage or devalue their contribution. Under the conditions of those programs, it made sense for activists in a medium-sized Russian organization with two project ideas to splinter into two smaller groups in order to maximize their funding potential. Another common strategy was for one activist to found several organizations, each with a slightly different name, so that each organization could apply to the same grant program.¹¹

One persistent problem of Western aid, related to the proliferation of small groups, is opportunism on the part of Russian groups—organizations springing up in response to financial opportunities alone. Lessons learned over the past decade about organizing grant competitions have allowed donors to weed out the most blatant forms of opportunism. But the problem continues to be of concern. One St. Petersburg environmentalist argues that during perestroika environmental slogans were adopted by many who later had no commitment to the movement and created “pseudoinstitutions...making a fuss about pseudoproblems, creating an illusion of vigorous activity” in order to further their own political careers. That period was “characterized by mass use of environmental slogans and forms of the ‘Green’ movement by people who were,

¹⁰ Author interview, St. Petersburg, May 5, 1999.

¹¹ This tactic, combined with the fact that many activists retain their professional affiliations in academic or government institutions, can lead to humorous and confusing encounters, in which several different business cards are offered to the interviewer and the interviewee responds differently to questions depending on which group he or she is representing at that time.

in fact, quite far off from the ideology of environmentalists.” This activist applauds the disappearance of organizations “which have no influence and cannot mobilize local resources for their activity,” but he also worries that this natural decline is “complicated by the ‘western’ financial assistance, keeping ‘afloat’ the environmental NGO, whose basic task quite often was and is to get this assistance” (Shevchuk 1995). A milder form of this opportunism occurs when an existing organization develops a project in response to a grant posting, not in response to local needs or demand. Several activists noted that, in retrospect, this practice has proven detrimental to their organizational development by leading them into issue areas in which they had less expertise or to which they were less committed.

In the past few years, funding strategies have shifted somewhat, and donors now tend to give slightly larger grants to organizations that have demonstrated success in the past (an “achievement-based” award strategy). Yet many foreign officials still praise the early “seed grants” in spite of their drawbacks because they quickly created a pluralistic NGO sector. One U.S. donor notes that while “Russians historically have not been good coalition builders” and “the environmental community and the women’s movement are two good examples of a lot of fractious...interaction,” if you have “at an early stage of sector development a lot of players at the table, it helps create healthier organizations at the end than if you have one or two that from the beginning are sort of coddled or nurtured or hot-house developed.”¹² However, another more senior U.S. official defends the new targeted funding, arguing that there are too many NGOs in Russia right now and that NGOs need to compete more for the foreign resources they receive.¹³ As foreign grant competitions focus on fewer, larger projects, donors have attempted to find another way to assist as many NGOs as possible while efficiently using scarce money and time. Their new funding strategy is to establish NGO resource centers in different Russian regions that will provide consulting services, but not funding, for new NGOs. While resource centers are cost-efficient for donors, it is not yet clear whether they will be sustainable since these centers usually suffer from a lack of an indigenous base to an even greater degree than the NGOs themselves. Some activists also have expressed concern that resource center projects often build

¹² Author interview, Moscow, March 24, 2000.

¹³ Author interview, Moscow, April 21, 2000. This official compares the proliferation of NGOs to the large number of newspapers in Russia, each unable to maintain a financially viable readership, and to the great number of political parties that do not actually represent society’s interests. She argues that each of these sectors needs to be consolidated in order to be more viable in the future.

the new institution on the basis of the region's most effective NGO, thereby diverting that group from its original task.

In spite of frequently fierce competition for foreign grants, external funding is not a long-term solution for Russian NGOs. Based on studies of poor people's movements within the United States, Piven and Cloward (1977) have argued that resources from an external source are extremely attractive for movement organizations based on resource-poor constituencies, but that the acquisition of this support is also fraught with strategic and tactical concerns. For example, reliance on external sources may jeopardize the sustainability of the organization because it is "not possible to compel concessions from elites that can be used as resources to sustain oppositional organization over time," if concessions are simply not in the interest of those same elites (Ibid.: xxi). We may already be witnessing "donor fatigue" in post-communist societies. Some observers argue that the flow of aid to the region is beginning to slow, with uncertain consequences for the organizations that have relied on this money. External funders may also seek to moderate or restrain potentially subversive activism. McAdam points out other pitfalls of elite dependency, noting that external sponsorship of movement organizations frequently represents an effort to tame the movement or to divert activism away from social upheaval, violence, or political demands that are simply inconvenient for the elite (1982: 26-28).

Many difficulties in designing and reforming grant programs can be traced back to the pressure on donors from their own domestic political environment. Donors increasingly are asked to show measurable impact from their programs quickly or, as one donor puts it, to address "the whole question of getting the most bang for your buck." A European donor noted that his office is required to spend all of their money in a single year or his own government "will make bombs with it." Another official sums up the situation this way:

We used to try to seek out areas in which we hadn't done any grant making before. Oh great, we got a proposal from Ust-Deninsk where we've never been! We are moving away from it and trying to identify regions in which there are leaders, individuals, organizations, local governments that are open and receptive to change, that are committed to it, and that have the institutional capacity to undertake projects. And we also as part of that have really moved away from competitions per se.¹⁴

There are dangers to this approach, as this same official recognizes: "it's very controversial...within our own staff there are a lot of people who feel that we are headed in the

¹⁴ Author interview, Moscow, March 24, 2000.

wrong direction because the gap between the winners and losers becomes greater.” Not surprisingly, the narrowing of recipients has not been popular among the NGO community. A magazine for the NGO community ran a cartoon in which two men each hold one hand of a third man who is dangling over a cliff and one says, “It seems to me that we have supported him long enough. Now it’s time to let go so that he learns to be independent.”¹⁵

The primary focus of civil society programs thus far has been to increase the total number of NGOs in a transitional society. In this task, donors have been guided by the firm belief that “more NGOs meant more democracy” (Sampson, 1996: 128). In spite of donors’ efforts, however, many Russian organizations resemble their Western brethren only superficially, on their business cards and brochures. Many are simply “NGIs,” or “non-governmental individuals”¹⁶—organizations based on family networks or a charismatic leader. In almost every case, however, each organization expends a significant amount of energy trying to look as much like the donor model as possible, leading to a hollowing out of the organizational form in which there is a greater emphasis on structure than content. With its greater emphasis on mimicking a certain organizational style than on developing real connections to the community, it is possible that the NGO model obscures or crowds out other possible organizational types and relationships that may be more sustainable in the Russian context.

Ultimately these disadvantages of the NGO-donor relationship relate to the power imbalance inherent in it. Goldman argues that the issues of dependency in this relationship cannot be avoided, but “can only be managed and minimized” (1988: 52). If not managed, the issue of NGO dependency could undermine the donors’ broader goal of democratization. In reacting to the donors’ incentives, activists learn survival techniques that may not help them to continue their work once foreign funding dries up, as these techniques are not applicable in their own cultural milieu. Thus, the money spent to encourage and support these organizations has trained them to organize around opportunities that may be restricted to the early years of the transition and does not guarantee their sustainability.

¹⁵ *Byulleten' Moskovskogo ISAR*, No. 6, Summer 1998, p. 20-21: “Mne kazhetsya, shto my dostatochno dolgo okazyvali emu podderzhku. Teper' pora eto otpustit', shtoby on nauchilcya samostoyatel'nosti.”

¹⁶ Thanks to David Gordon, PERC, for bringing this term to my attention.

B. Framing

Another way in which donors set incentives for Russian environmental NGOs is by framing issues—that is, donors determine how issues and strategies within the movement are prioritized. In the context of strictly domestic social activism, framing is usually defined as identifying which issues and strategies will resonate with pre-existing societal norms and cultural values and most effectively mobilize public support within that society (Snow et. al., 1986; Snow and Benford, 1992). Therefore, framing tactics depend on a movement’s perceived constituency: its members or beneficiaries, or, perhaps more broadly, its supporters. Framing is thus designed strategically in response to those people the movement is trying to convince to support its goals, and framing differences logically arise out of differences in perceived constituencies. Yet in the case of an NGO sector broadly supported by external actors, there tends to be a “constituency in principle” and a “constituency in practice” for both the environmental activists and the aid donors. In the case of the Russian green movement, the constituency in principle for both donors and Russian environmental NGOs is the general Russian population, and the programs of the donors and projects of the NGOs are designed to serve the population’s needs and improve their lives, politically and substantively. In practice, however, U.S. donors need to justify their programs to Congress, as does Congress to its taxpayers. And the Russian NGOs, due to the extreme resource poverty of the constituency in principle, need to justify their projects to donors. Thus, the NGOs’ constituency in practice has become the donors themselves.

Due to these different constituencies, the primary framing tension in this relationship centers on the difference between the *environmental framing* of the NGOs and the *civil society-democratization framing* of the donors. In the former, NGO activity is directed at improving the environmental situation in Russia, while in the latter NGOs are viewed as a vehicle for achieving, and for symbolizing, democratic pluralism. This is problematic. In many cases Western efforts to develop civil society through the activities of environmental organizations do not necessarily support the type of projects that will most effectively limit environmental degradation in Russia, which leads environmentalists to feel frustrated with the priorities of grant programs. And ironically, while the donors’ desired outcome may be broader social participation and more effective articulation of social interests in Russia, the donors framing strategies actually encourage Russian environmental organizations to grow increasingly distant from their

domestic constituency. Externally introduced framing strategies may divert the environmental movement from issues of local concern and lessen its likelihood of success.¹⁷

One of the most obvious framing related questions is how donors determine the funding priorities within grant programs. Who determines which type of environmental issues are most deserving of support? One U.S. official acknowledges that, while they work with their Russian counterparts to develop program priorities, the U.S. government has its own environmental priorities—such as biodiversity, global warming, nuclear safety, and sustainable development—which can only be addressed on a global scale.¹⁸ While some activists in European Russia are also concerned about sustainable development,¹⁹ for the most part Russian environmentalists express interest in more locally rooted problems, such as polluted lakes and streams, refuse in parks, uncontrolled stray pet populations, and health problems related to industrial pollution. A leader of a Russian green party noted that donors direct too much of their funding toward wildlife rather than toward “real problems here and now in Russia.”²⁰ Adhering to the broader goal of democratization, donor programs often emphasize the social over the scientific. A number of Russian environmentalists express concern over the lack of money available to train the next generation of scientists who will work to support the green movement.²¹ Noting donors’ fondness for environmental education programs, as opposed to industrial pollution and other urban environmental problems, one respondent worried that “feel good” ecological education is causing “cognitive dissonance” for Russian children who have to live in the real world and who then feel guilty for “doing what they must to survive in a system that won’t allow them to be ecological.” He suggested that donors work on issues of “energy, infrastructure, and not all of these ridiculous social projects.”²² Donors have started to recognize this pitfall. In the last few years donors have begun a slow and incomplete shift from encouraging Russian NGOs to work toward pre-existing priorities to encouraging Russian NGOs to generate their own ideas.

¹⁷ Even when financial resources are relatively abundant, a lack of local support could be crippling for NGOs. As a Russian proverb says, “A hundred friends is better than a hundred rubles.”

¹⁸ Author interview, Moscow, April 3, 2000.

¹⁹Note, however, that some Russian environmentalists have called sustainable development “a post-capitalist ideology and cannot be applied to Russia” and noted that there is too much similarity between sustainable development and communist ideology. (Tysiachniouk and McCarthy, p. 4.)

²⁰ Author interview, St. Petersburg, April 26, 1999.

²¹ Author interview, Novosibirsk, December 7, 1999.

²² Author interview, Vladivostok, November 12, 1999.

As Russian activists have begun to assert their own authority in terms of prioritizing the ecological problems they are willing to tackle, they are becoming more circumspect about taking the advice of their Western partners. A St. Petersburg environmentalist comments:

The “Western Greens”...not only do not know what plants and animals are protected in the region, or what the composition of sewage from the typical pig farm is.... To put it simply, they do not know anything which is beyond the scope of their main professional line. Therefore, their advice might often prove to be speculative and practically inapplicable (Shevchuk 1995).

One orientation that both sets of actors appear to share, however, is a sense of frustration with the passivity of the Russian population. This is a sentiment that occasionally sounds somewhat elitist, lending credence to fears that donor funding is creating a new kind of NGO nomenklatura. Both sets of actors argue that one of their goals is to create a “more civilized society,” but a number of donors and activists claim that it has been disappointing to work with the apathetic local population. Both sets of actors cite the depressing effect of Russia’s economic transition to justify their disconnect from the average Russian citizen, but few recognize that there might be a link between imposed priorities and their lack of resonance with the population.

Most Russian environmental organizations are not membership based, and few organizations engage in community outreach.²³ This lack of member support can be traced in part to economic constraints on the population, but it is also likely connected to the NGOs’ reliance on Western grants that preclude the need for members. In fact, few groups express interest in acquiring members or spend much time on membership drives. When asked about his organization’s relations with the local community, one St. Petersburg environmentalist answered with this proverb: “To make a deal with a Russian man, beat him with money or a big stick.” In other words, motivating people with ideas is futile, only economic incentives or punishment gets the public’s attention. Other groups have reported that the public relates to them with suspicion or simply is not interested. When asked about their interaction with the local population, another organization summed up their mutual indifference by stating: “The population relates on the basis of neutrality or with bias—what do we have to do with that?”²⁴ A St. Petersburg activist and a Russian scholar, through their own survey research, received responses from

²³ Greenpeace is one of the few exceptions, boasting thousands of members in Russia, although it is not clear how many of the organizations’ members regularly pay dues.

²⁴ Quotes from Green Petersburg: In Questions and Answers, *Pchela*, #11, 1997, pp. 76-88.

environmentalists such as: “We do not know what to say to people and what to call them for”; “We do not know where to find interested people, nor do we know what to suggest to them”; “We do not know how to mobilize people for constructive action and are afraid of misunderstandings;” “We do not have experience talking to people” (Tysiachniouk and Karpov 1998). Considering this lack of a social base for NGOs, one longtime environmental activist from southern Russia goes so far as to say that there is no environmental movement in Russia today. She states that as new organizations have sprung up, they have “formed what they called the third sector and they work without, or almost without, connections with the population” (Luneva 1998).

Slowly donors are coming to realize that the NGOs they have fostered have, for the most part, failed to develop links with local communities. One official representing a private foundation concluded that the NGOs they have funded are “too ivory tower, on the fringe of society.”²⁵ She says that she often hears NGO leaders say “the public doesn’t understand us,” but the foundation is now paying more attention to whether and how Russian organizations are trying to reach out to the public. A Russian activist in Vladivostok notes that the population simply does not understand what the NGO sector is or why they might need it, but she recognizes that it is the NGO sector’s job to go into the community and educate people about their rights and responsibilities.²⁶ The leader of a Russian NGO resource center commented that social organizations have no money, partly because no one thinks that the work they do is important and they are not seen as able to solve any social problems.²⁷ Part of the problem might be that as Russian NGOs discover how to succeed in the competitive grant arena, they begin adopting a new transnational NGO language of “pro’yekty” and “fondraising” that mimics the donors’ rhetoric and priorities, but that does not resonate with potential local partners.

Funding focused directly on local environmental problems may do more to assist in civil society development than training and increasing organizational capacity. With such funding, activists could identify relevant problems on their own initiative and take responsibility for persuading community members to support them. A rapprochement with the local population cannot come too soon. Many environmental NGOs are already suspected of operating under

²⁵ Author interview, Moscow, May 19, 2000.

²⁶ Author interview (a), Vladivostok, November 1, 1999.

²⁷ Author interview (b), Vladivostok, November 1, 1999.

“foreign control.” One St. Petersburg activist, who cooperates with Western donors, admits that the greens’ direct employment by Western organizations and reliance on Western funding opens them up to this charge.²⁸ He traces the lack of popular support for jailed environmentalists, such as Aleksandr Nikitin and Grigorii Pasko, to this popular belief.²⁹

Undeniably, the ability of Russian NGOs to frame their activities is also constrained by domestic factors. In the Russian transitional political context, movement framing may be less straightforward than simply trying to attract the greatest number of supporters and resources to one’s cause. In a setting of lingering authoritarian practices, NGOs may be wary of directly opposing government policies or even of attracting too much public attention to their activities. Even if the political discourse continues to liberalize, the government may only slowly sanction certain issues as “open” for public debate. For example, nuclear waste remains a closely monitored topic. These and other constraints on free speech may lead donors to frame their activities differently depending on who their audience is, with one type of framing for taxpayers, another for the transitional government, and a third for sponsored NGOs. Out of necessity, Russian activists engage in similar subterfuge. There is some danger that these alternate framings, used simultaneously with different audiences, may make it more difficult for Russian NGOs and aid donors to communicate clearly about their expectations and priorities.

On the other hand, there may also be deeper synergy between the donor and activist framing strategies and the goals they represent. For example, if one considers the goals of non-governmental organizations broadly, in addition to their particular issue-based goals, NGOs also demand basic civil and political rights, the enforcement of the rule of law, and the implementation of existing government policies. Perhaps these broad demands could serve as a vehicle for increasing democratization, but without the support of local communities for NGO issues and projects, these more general demands lack legitimacy and are unlikely to be taken seriously by the Russian government.

²⁸ Author interview, St. Petersburg, April 5, 1999.

²⁹ Nikitin is a former Russian naval officer charged with espionage and the disclosure of state secrets in connection with a report he wrote on the risks of radioactive pollution from Russia’s Northern Fleet while working for the Norwegian environmental organization Bellona in 1996. Pasko was charged treason relating to articles written for Japanese publications on the state of vessels in the Pacific Fleet in Vladivostok.

C. Political Opportunities

Political opportunities are the most difficult factor to specify in the donor-NGO relationship. In the Western political context, scholars have disaggregated political opportunities into four categories: the relative openness or closure of the institutionalized political system; the stability or instability of elite alignments; the presence or absence of elite allies; and the state's capacity and propensity for repression (McAdam 1982; Kriesi et.al. 1995). When looking at specifically transitional environments, however, it seems clear that informal political practices are often as significant to NGO development as formal political structures, especially in a context of political instability where formal practices are either very new or not fully institutionalized.³⁰

For most of the 1990s, foreign governments and donors focused their energies on attempting to ensure the survival of the Yeltsin government and preventing economic collapse in Russia. During that period, donors were reluctant to push the federal government too strongly toward reform. Yet these same state institutions and laws help create the domestic opportunity structure that allow NGOs to carry out their work. Currently in Russia the registration and tax laws generally discourage social activism throughout the country, although there is some regional variation in response to local political opportunities. While institutionalized political arenas such as the legislature or parliament of a transitional government might (technically) be open to the public, there are very few institutionalized channels for public participation or NGO access. Federal and regional legislatures are also often not the site of real political decision-making on some issues. Behind the scenes, elite groups such as the Russian oligarchs or local political officials hold the power to influence or even set policy, and yet they remain completely inaccessible to social groups. Major policy decisions are often made by the executive behind the closed doors of the Kremlin.

Elite alignments are highly unstable and elite allies difficult for NGOs to locate.³¹ Extreme ideological differentiation among elites may linger through the transition period. For example, it is likely that certain elite groups will oppose democratization or liberalization and

³⁰ While I am not focusing on the Russian domestic political opportunity structure in this paper, I do not want to downplay the continuing importance of the Russian state. The nature of the state itself, both its institutions and actors, remains the most important features of the political opportunity structure. The state is the "target, sponsor, antagonist" of social movements, even during a political transition (Jenkins and Klandermans, 1995).

³¹ While a certain degree of instability in elite alignments might work in the favor of NGOs, generating new opportunities for alliance, Russian political blocs tend to consolidate during election campaigns, hastily produce a political platform, and then decline in significance during day to day policy making.

challenge the new “rules of the game,” advocating instead a return to authoritarian politics. In such a situation, societal organizations supporting the reform process may feel compelled to ally themselves with elite factions that nominally are orchestrating the transition, even when there are other, fairly dramatic, political differences between them. This type of compromise alliance might endure as long as opponents reform continue to be a threat, either because they have significant popular support or because they control certain key economic resources. Finally, in Russia the state’s capacity and propensity for repression is higher than in typical Western political environments. Particularly threatening to NGOs is the fact that the Soviet state security and intelligence apparatus was never dismantled.

The political opportunities created by domestic political institutions and actors are mediated to a certain degree by incentives put in place by Western donors. Note, however, that foreign aid officials are limited in promoting their NGO model and donating funds in two significant ways. First, donors are subject to constraints emerging from their relationship with their own domestic constituencies. As noted in the resource section, many donors feel pressure to disburse aid quickly and to show clear results in order to justify their programs to legislatures and taxpayers at home. They must also address more subtle ideological concerns, such as demonstrating the superiority and resilience of “Western” political and economic institutions. Second, donors—both government-sponsored and private foundations—are also constrained by their bilateral relationship with the Russian government. The transitional government is able to set limits, both formal and informal, on donor activities and discourage support for certain types of NGOs that are perceived as threatening to the government. Aid is also vulnerable to fluctuations in Russia’s relationship to the West. International conflicts such as the NATO bombing of Yugoslavia or the war in Chechnya can significantly delay planned aid or in some cases can shut down donor programs all together.

Donors are also influenced by varying political opportunities within Russia. Because they need to show the impact of their programs, they are increasingly inclined to carry out programs in regions where NGOs are already moderately successful or the regional government expresses interest in working with NGOs. One U.S. government donor, admitting that her organization is now more selective about where it sets up programs, comments that “the greatest determinant I would point to as to whether regions are receptive or good prospects in terms of technical

assistance is government, local government.”³² Local governments do often passively assist these organizations through “donations” in kind—often simply ignoring NGOs’ use of government infrastructure. For example, many NGOs use state-owned premises—some with explicit permission, but many without—to house their offices. These premises, usually institutes and schools, often include a telephone and basic office equipment. This kind of support is, however, always very precarious. Some NGO activists, even those dependent on the local government for offices, are reluctant to engage in more overt reliance on state institutions. One Russian observer characterizes NGO attitudes as the following: “to have state money would be great, so let’s have it! ...but if they give it they will impose their full control, including ideology” (Solovyova 1995). Not surprisingly, then, NGOs are generally reluctant to engage in cooperative relations with the government, even when explicitly encouraged by donors.

Donors, on the other hand, have attempted to convince federal and regional governments that NGOs can play a positive role in governance. Some activists express frustration that donors prematurely encourage them to work through existing government channels, in spite of significant corruption and the dearth of opportunities for substantive participation. The risk in cooperating with the government is that it could result in NGOs inadvertently legitimizing state institutions and legal procedures that are only nominally democratic. For example, a Vladivostok activist argues that the mafia’s influence and money permeate the local government where her organization operates. She says her organization has found it difficult to find partners within the government, noting, “There are lots of different interests within the government and you can’t always guess someone’s interests based on their [official] position.” Other environmentalists, when queried about their reluctance to work with the government, have commented that “laws exist only in theory” and “the President himself violates the laws.” One concludes that the “Russian government blocks public participation in the decision making process” (Tysiachniouk and McCarthy, 1999: 8, 14).

The incentives for local environmental NGOs to orient themselves toward transnational—as opposed to local—issues does seem to make these organizations somewhat less political in their own domestic milieu. Donors encourage NGOs to cooperate with, but rarely to confront, the government. Many grants forbid recipients from electioneering, and some discourage direct lobbying on projects supported by donor funds. Donors also have expressed

³² Author interview, Moscow, March 24, 2000.

reluctance to fund groups that resist the government's "reformist" project and that are interested in overt protest against the government or civil disobedience. While their avoidance of these politically sensitive activities is understandable, they may be contributing to the deradicalization of the environmental movement. Evidence from Western social movements has shown that disruptive behavior is often correlated with the achievement of movement goals (Gamson 1975). Dependence on external funding may therefore cost the movement its radical flank effects. As McAdam argues, although much may be gained by becoming a player in routinized politics, an organization simultaneously loses "the disruptive potential from which it drew most of its effectiveness." He also expresses concern that by attempting to foster a particular model for NGOs or civil society as a whole, and "by thoroughly legitimating and institutionalizing protest, the western democracies will render [the model] increasingly ineffective as a social-change vehicle" (1998b: 232-233).

After a decade of aid, it appears that instead of reinforcing cooperative NGO-government relations in the Russian domestic sphere, donor funding has provided NGOs an alternative to engaging with domestic actors. After extensive surveying of activists, two Russian sociologists argue that Russian environmentalists strategize to escape the infelicitous domestic sphere by embedding themselves in transnational networks. They do so in order "to have a safe (stable) resource pool abroad (better in the West or Japan)" and "to disengage as much as possible from current political battles in Russia." As a general strategy, NGO disengagement from domestic political disputes seems unlikely to further Russian democratization or the development of a robust civil society.

IV. Conclusion

Although civil society may be poorly understood theoretically, it still serves as the primary framing device for donors supporting democratization, as shown above. These predominantly Western transnational actors look not to the actual workings of their own political systems, but to ideal-types of civil society as portrayed by political philosophers, above all Tocqueville. According to the simplistic interpretation of these texts, a healthy dose of civil society will solve almost any social or political ill.³³ This ideal of civil society then informs the reality of designing

³³ This belief is particularly interesting given that not all elements of civil society are particularly "civil," notably the mafia, some nationalist organizations, and other family-based groups. Fowler argues that "[i]n the short run,

and implementing “strengthening civil society” projects. Alan Fowler, a scholar studying civil society promotion in many regions, argues:

The aid system has adopted a “mirror” view of civil society. In other words, countries which do not have the types of organisations and institutional configurations found in the democratic, market-based North should be quickly helped to create them, [thereby] creating the formal structure of civil society as if the roots do not matter. (Fowler, 211)

In exporting the NGO model, what is lost is attention to civil society’s enabling environment. As Dahrendorf has noted in relation to post-Soviet transitions, the idea of civil society has been glamorized to such an extent that it has obscured both the state’s necessary judicial and regulatory contribution to the development of civil society and the socioeconomic underpinnings of actually existing civil societies. Foreign aid to “strengthen civil society” and “promote democratization” may lead to the victory of organizational form over content—organizations that mimic those of advanced democracies but that exist in a political system that lacks democratic substance. Although this paper has focused on Russian non-governmental organizations and Western aid donors, these dangers doubtless apply to the numerous other resource poor and transitional political environments in which donors try to “assist” democratization.

The dilemmas of external funding are clear. On one hand, Russian NGOs need aid to continue their activities and foreign funding does help foster a proliferation of NGOs. On the other hand, external funding brings with it many perverse consequences. In particular, NGOs may become detached from their “natural” constituency, or those who would benefit most directly from movement success. This is problematic since membership support is the basis for NGO legitimacy and NGOs’ claims to represent the wishes of the people to their own government and to international political institutions. In addition, the unique pressures faced by foreign aid officials has led to a strategy of trying to encourage the accelerated development of NGOs and to emphasize “increased capacity.” Unfortunately, this has come at the cost of long term sustainability. Donors attempt to develop large, well-established NGOs quickly because they are easier to fund and require less administrative oversight than multiple smaller funding relationships, yet these large groups are even less likely than smaller grassroots organizations to be sustainable without external funding. In their haste to achieve a Western-style third sector, donors also encourage NGOs to professionalize their organization by following a particular

strengthening civil society is as likely to increase social tensions as to reduce them because more voices are better

administrative model that channels funding into staff training and administration while neglecting the substance of the organizations' activities. Professionalization also emphasizes conformity with certain business norms, potentially undermining NGOs' unique capacity for social transformation. Donors frequently encourage NGOs to develop contracting relations with the government in order to diversify their resource dependence. However, "contracting" relationship with only partially transformed states may require NGOs to tacitly accept continuing authoritarian practices. By promoting the premature adoption of Western-style institutionalized organizational forms and Western models of NGO-state relations, donors are in danger of undermining the very process of social and political transformation that they hope to promote. The result of Western funding policies may be an NGO sector that is less able both to solve Russian environmental problems and to pressure the Russian government to continue political liberalization.

Ironically, the Russian government has treated even the current moderate form of environmentalism as contrary to Russia's national interest, and it has used tax and registration laws and the judicial system to intimidate Russian environmental NGOs into further limiting their activities. In several cases, including those of Nikitin and Pasko mentioned earlier, publishers of environmental information have been arrested for allegedly breaching state security. The government's negative response has been reinforced by its backlash against independent media. This past spring, the State Committee for Ecology and the State Forestry Committee were abolished by presidential decree, and their responsibilities were transferred to the Ministry of Natural Resources, effectively ending environmental oversight in Russia. Some Russian environmental NGOs have responded to state repression by turning to alternate issue areas, such as environmental education. Others have reacted by broadening their demands and including basic human rights, freedom of association, freedom of the press, and the right to a fair trial as part of their basic platform.³⁴

At this point, it seems that donor funding might be better spent on grassroots programs of citizen empowerment. One donor from a private foundation argued that funding for NGO

able to stake their claim to public resources and policies." (8)

³⁴ Putin has said that he would like to be an environmentalist after his two terms as president are completed. He recently commented, "I've often thought about what I should do when my term expires...It is a noble task to support the ecological movement. At least I wouldn't be sorry to spend time on it." "To be honest, I've always admired people who devote their lives to environmental problems," he added (York and Freeland, *Globe and Mail*, Thursday, December 14, 2000).

development may be “a little bit like putting the cart before the horse” when most Russian citizens are not engaged in community activism at even the most basic level.³⁵ It might be more productive to design programs just to encourage more people to participate in civil society at all, encouraging them to expand their affiliations outside of a small circle of family and friends. If the definition of environmental priorities is expanded to include local issues, such as health, cleanliness, and safety, donors could fund projects that are more relevant to average Russian citizens and empower a broader swathe of the Russian people to change their lives. These local projects could be centered on decrepit apartment buildings, neighborhood parks, or polluted lakes and streams. Projects could be organized through existing institutions, such as schools and libraries, in order to reach the maximum number of local citizens. This type of project would require very little funding, an important asset since the citizens who could benefit most of activist experience are also the least skilled at writing grant applications, implementing accounting procedures, and writing elaborate reports and evaluations.

This is not to argue that the current programs that fund Russian NGOs are not worthwhile. While this paper has taken a critical view of donors’ efforts to promote civil society development, many of the positive programs at the community level in Russia could not have started without external support. Creating small social organizations that are internally democratic is a significant contribution to the development of civil society even if deeper connections with society have not yet been achieved. In a setting of political transition, organizing and sustaining these small pockets of democracy may well set the stage for further democratization. Given no great upheaval in West-Russian relations and no radical change in Western (particularly U.S.) policy toward Russia, donors will likely continue to work in Russia in the near future and further refine their programs. As one donor commented, “We thought that we would go to Russia, build civil society, declare victory and go home. But five years later we still haven’t declared victory, we’re still here, and we’re still at the table.”

³⁵ Author interview, Moscow, May 19, 2000.

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