

Preface

June 1997, a summer resort on the Volga River near Toliatti, Russia. Gender studies scholars and leaders of activist women's organizations in Russia gather to participate in the Second Annual Russian Summer School on Women's and Gender Research—"Volga '97." The school is hosted by the Moscow Center for Gender Studies and Samara State University and funded by the U.S.-based Ford Foundation. The conference is mainly directed at exposing young Russian scholars to academic work in feminist theory and studies of women's status in Russian society. Toward the end of the summer school, however, conflict erupts briefly in discussions of the development of the Russian women's movement. Women from far-flung provinces of Russia suddenly express disapproval of the ways in which some Moscow and St. Petersburg women's organizations have begun to focus solely on obtaining funding from foreign foundations and governments. Some accuse these foreign-funded organizations of being populated by "feminist-entrepreneurs" rather than "real" feminists motivated by passion for their cause.

As a foreign participant in the room, I felt that a door had been opened through which I could peek very briefly at some of the tensions in the Russian women's movement, before the door swung shut again and the gathering reassembled its outward composure. This incident contrasted starkly with popular Western accounts of the Russian women's movement that characterized the movement as growing rapidly and becoming more united in pursuit of women's rights. I immediately became intrigued by the question of who was receiving funding from foreign donors, who was not, and what the impact of that funding was on the movement in reality.

As I looked more into these questions upon returning to the United States, I realized that they were relevant not only for women's organizations but also for all kinds of movements and organizations in civil society. Foreign donors, both governmental and private, had flooded into Russia beginning in 1991 with the collapse of the Soviet regime, with the goal of supporting

democratic development in Russia. An ever-increasing component of this democracy promotion strategy has been assistance to civil society, since vibrant civil societies have come to be seen in recent years as a crucial element guaranteeing the durability of democratic regimes.

Because of the increasing size of the “democracy industry,” policy analysts have begun to take interest in assessing the actual impact and consequences of democracy assistance. In the case of assistance to civil society development—an area of growing popularity in foreign aid—we in fact know very little about the actual effects of foreign donors’ assistance.¹ During the 1990s, billions of dollars from the budgets of state foreign assistance agencies and Western nongovernmental organizations have been bet on the yet unproven assumption that assistance to nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) does in fact contribute significantly to the development of civil society and, in turn, to the institutionalization of liberal democratic regimes.²

Not only politicians and foreign aid practitioners are curious about the dynamics of foreign assistance, however. Scholars of international relations are also interested in studying its patterns, partly because this provides one avenue for understanding how states may modify the political regimes of other states—not by coercion, but by conflict-free promotion of changes in the behavior of citizens at the sub-state level. Scholars of civil society and regime transitions in comparative politics are concerned with whether or not transnational actors and norms are significantly shaping civil societies in democratizing countries, since existing theories have assumed that civil society development is largely a domestic process.³

When I landed in Russia in 1998 to begin my investigation of foreign donors’ impact on civil society in Russia, my principal research questions were: “Are foreign donors having an impact, and if it exists, does their influence lead to positive developments for democratization in Russia?” I quickly discovered that, indeed, foreign assistance was having a huge impact on the size and shape of the Russian NGO community in terms of boosting the numbers of NGOs in existence and the priorities they pursued. Some of the developments appeared to foster democracy-promoting behavior, while others did not. Yet I was puzzled by the variation in outcomes that I observed among foreign-funded NGOs. Why was it that different NGOs with similar levels of funding from Western donor organizations varied so much in their levels of success in mobilizing? Why did the presence of foreign funding sometimes seem to facilitate NGO growth and even public policy successes and normative change in society, while other times it led to NGO stagnation that consisted of squabbling among activists and irrelevance to the public? This book provides an explanation for why we observe these divergent outcomes under conditions of similar transnational support.

I argue that foreign donors have the best chance of contributing to the successful development of Russian NGOs under two conditions. First, assistance programs are likely to make a difference when they promote NGO work on issues that can be framed in terms of norms, or “collective expectations about proper behavior for a given identity” (Jepperson, Wendt, and Katzenstein, 1996, p. 54), that are embraced universally around the world. There must be compatibility between the norms that foreign donors promote and the normative contexts encountered by the NGOs they support. In order to be successful in their local contexts, NGO activists must frame their campaigns in terms of the pursuit of norms that are accepted locally. This means that those norms must be either universal in nature or culturally specific to Russia. Since foreign donors are unlikely ever to promote norms that are particular to Russia, they will only succeed when they promote NGO campaigns based on universally embraced norms rather than specifically Western societal norms.

Second, foreign donors are likely to contribute to successful NGO development when they concentrate that development in regions where there is support from local political structures and elites. Where local elites are relatively supportive of the concept of an autonomous NGO sector (or at least do not actively harass NGOs), attitudinal and behavioral changes brought about by transnational assistance are substantial and thus likely to be long term. In contrast, in regions where transnational assistance has been concentrated intensively for several years, but where the local political environment is decidedly discouraging to NGOs, a typical outcome among NGOs is “decoupling”; activists make statements in private or to Western audiences that contradict the behaviors they exhibit in public life. Many of these activists, at a surface level, speak in terms familiar to Western activists but, at the level of behavior and deeper attitudes, harbor entirely different assumptions about their role in society and thus are not fully integrated into global understandings of civil society. It is possible for foreign donors to have a positive impact on civil society development in these contexts if they closely study the characteristics of NGOs that exist in those regions and choose carefully which ones to support, based on evidence of the NGOs’ solid commitment to clearly identified goals. This careful approach to assistance is likely to become more necessary across Russia in the context of a more restrictive political opportunity structure for NGOs that has developed in the years of the Putin administration.

In developing the first proposition about the relationship between universal norms and successful NGO development outcomes, I compare the development patterns of two subsectors of NGOs—the women’s movement and the soldiers’ rights movement—that pursue different kinds of issues. In

order to investigate the second proposition regarding different political contexts, I have chosen the method of comparing different regional political environments within the same state rather than adopting the classic comparative technique of comparing political environments across different states. The clear advantage that this method affords is the ability to hold constant many aspects of so-called “political culture” and socioeconomic variables that, in most cross-national studies, surface as problematic. I compare foreign assistance levels across seven Russian regions, combined with relatively positive or negative regional political environments (as concerns NGOs), to investigate how these different combinations of transnational and domestic political factors affect the local NGO community overall.

Scholars have rarely made systematic attempts to understand the role of transnational factors in civil society, while taking into account domestic factors as competing explanations affecting development. Research into transnational influences on civil society has seldom overlapped conceptually with work on the development of social movements within Russia. This book contributes to an area of empirical and theoretical knowledge about post-Soviet Russian civil society that is small, but quickly growing.⁴ This study merely generates hypotheses from these cases about the relationship between foreign democracy assistance, societal norms, and local political conditions in explaining NGO development. I leave to future work the task of testing these hypotheses further.

Chapter Outline

Chapter One develops the theoretical arguments discussed here and considers alternative explanations for the patterns of NGO development that have occurred in Russia. It also outlines the details of the study design and explains my definition of the variables of foreign assistance, NGO development, and domestic political environment. Chapter Two introduces the domestic context of Russian civil society and presents the foreign donors that have interacted with Russian NGOs in the post-Soviet period. Chapters Three and Four present the detailed theoretical explanations and empirical evidence supporting the two components of my argument. And Chapter Five discusses the implications of the findings for theory on international relations and civil society in democratization, as well as for the practical design of democracy assistance programs, within the context of current developments in Russian politics.