

# Civil Society in the New Authoritarianism

PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 35

*James Richter*

*Bates College*

*August 2008*

Russian prime minister and former president Vladimir Putin's efforts to strengthen the Russian state are well-known. His consistent advocacy of a strong society is less so. In this respect, Putin's approach is not much different from Beijing's. Both regimes recognize that bureaucratic management of society can no longer compete in a globalizing society, and both look to social organizations to perform tasks previously left to the state: the delivery of social services; provision of vertical and horizontal information conduits; the channeling of societal demands into accepted institutional pathways; and the monitoring of government agencies to reduce corruption.

Encouraging a more active society entails some risks, however. Autonomous student organizations played a key role in the 1989 protests in Tiananmen Square and in this decade's color revolutions in Georgia, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan. These last uprisings prompted both Russia and China to tighten their controls over social organizations, particularly those depending on foreign assistance. If the regimes constrain the public sphere too tightly, though, people will retreat into their private lives and the state again will need a cumbersome bureaucracy to get things done. This memo examines the mechanisms the current Russian and Chinese regimes use to strike a balance between autonomy and control of social organizations, and to what effect.

## **Mechanisms for an Organized Civil Society**

## **Government-Organized Nongovernmental Organizations (GONGOs)**

Regimes in both Russia and China have promoted organizational networks with close links to state agencies. They have supplemented the mass organizations previously associated with state socialism, such as trade unions and women's groups, with organizations constructed along more Western models, such as trade and professional organizations, technological and policy institutes, charitable organizations, and other groups, filling in gaps left by a receding state.

## **Registration and Re-registration**

Both regimes have tailored registration requirements to control the growth of independent organizations. They have also periodically required existing organizations to re-register in order to weed out inactive or undesirable organizations.

## **Funding**

Both regimes manipulate the revenue stream to social organizations in order to patrol the boundaries of the public sphere. In both states the government is a key source of support for social organizations. Private giving remains undeveloped (partly because tax laws do not encourage it) and, particularly in Russia, the corporate giving that does take place is heavily influenced by government preferences. Meanwhile, both regimes regard outside assistance with ambivalence: foreign donors can lend legitimacy to a regime's democratic pretensions, introduce innovative techniques and practices, and offset the necessity for state funding, but they may also pursue agendas at variance with the state. The color revolutions in Eurasia have made such suspicions particularly acute.

## **Repression**

Laws in both states essentially allow the authorities to shut down any organization they choose. The color revolutions prompted both regimes to step up the surveillance and harassment of independent organizations, including tax audits, police raids, expulsions, and arrests.

## **Contrasting Outcomes**

If both regimes use the same tools, their overall strategies toward social organizations and the impact of those strategies are still quite different. In China, state and society overlap to a greater degree; state officials tolerate more social autonomy even as grassroots organizations accept state-established boundaries. Despite recent efforts to tighten control, most observers believe Chinese authorities will have trouble controlling the boundaries of the public sphere in the future. In Russia, by contrast, state and society continue to be seen as distinct, if not mutually exclusive, entities. The Putin administration, in particular, was

suspicious of societal autonomy and sought to dominate the public sphere. Without significant changes under the new administration, the danger for Russia is that the social sphere will devolve into another branch of state bureaucracy.

## **China**

The Communist Party began promoting “a strong society” in conjunction with its reforms in 1978. After the Tiananmen demonstrations in 1989, Beijing required all new social organizations to find a government-approved sponsor (usually a government agency or national GONGO) to supervise their activities. The regime then added new organizational and financial requirements for registered organizations in 1998 and 2004. China scholar and civil society specialist Jude Howell, however, notes that many grassroots organizations have evaded cumbersome registration requirements by operating in affiliation with, or as part of, a specific program within an existing organization. Most informal organizations still respect the constraints placed by authorities, however, since they do not want to attract critical attention and even hope to gain access to government resources. The government, for its part, generally tolerates these organizations as they provide essential services on the cheap.

Though national and regional governments remain the single largest source of funding for Chinese social organizations, Howell and China scholar Quisha Ma maintain that state support is not enough for these organizations to perform the tasks expected of them. They must look elsewhere for support and subsequently are responsive to a number of constituencies outside the state. Local fundraising regulations are less restrictive than in Russia, and many Chinese organizations finance their activities with for-profit enterprises on the side. Grassroots organizations also often depend heavily on foreign assistance funds. The regulations pertaining to foreign-based organizations remain undeveloped, however, reflecting the government’s ambivalence towards such funding. The Communist leadership did permit the Ford Foundation, perhaps the largest international nongovernmental organization (INGO) operating in China, to find an official sponsor in Beijing, but many other INGOs have had to operate from Hong Kong, Macao, or in regions outside of Beijing, or find other ways to bypass registration hurdles.

Since the color revolutions in Ukraine and, particularly, Kyrgyzstan, Chinese authorities have more aggressively enforced the boundaries of the public sphere. New regulations expected to simplify the work of INGOs in China were delayed indefinitely. Organizations addressing politically sensitive issues were harassed or shut down. Even the relatively pro-Chinese editor of the English-language *China Development Brief*, Nick Young, was not allowed to return to the country after a brief absence.

Still, most scholars agree that Chinese authorities will find it difficult to

enforce these boundaries over the long-term. The government does not have the capacity to monitor all the formal and informal organizations operating in China, and the inadequacy of state funding means social organization will continue to turn to alternative constituencies. The recent wave of riots, strikes, and other forms of social unrest in China is also likely to strengthen the hand of organizations that offer to address pressing social needs that the state does not want to, or is unable to, address.

Finally, China's efforts to integrate itself more fully into the world community have made it more susceptible to international pressure. In addition to the scrutiny placed on China's human rights record in connection with the Beijing Olympics, the SARS epidemic, and the May 2008 earthquake in Sichuan province placed considerable pressure upon the regime to be more transparent. This can only help the cause of those seeking to expand the public realm.

### **Russia**

During the 1990s, the laws governing nongovernmental organizations in Russia were quite liberal compared to the Chinese ones, and foreign assistance agencies spent millions to build a small network of independent advocacy organizations. Rather than the overlapping structures of GONGOs and formal and informal grassroots organizations found in China, the networks of independent organizations and those tied to state authorities in Russia operated in separate circles and regarded each other with suspicion.

As president, Putin sought to displace the network of independent organizations with one of his own making. He was helped enormously in this endeavor by the rapid withdrawal of foreign assistance in the early 2000s, largely due to donor fatigue and changes in strategic priorities. The Kremlin has also done its best to steer private domestic donors away from organizations that are critical of the state. A new tax code passed in 2001 offered few incentives for private donors to give money to nonprofits, and the Kremlin's actions against oligarchs Boris Berezovsky and Mikhail Khodorkovsky, both of whom had been funding organizations that opposed Putin's policies, sent a clear message. As of 2006, moreover, the state has become by far the largest single donor to Russian social organizations, allocating over one billion rubles annually to a grant competition overseen by the Public Chamber.

Putin did not begin his attack on the autonomous public sphere in earnest until after Ukraine's Orange Revolution. In 2006 the Duma passed legislation requiring all NGOs to submit detailed financial accounts and creating a Federal Registration Service (FRS) with enormous powers to scrutinize the books and activities of NGOs. In addition, the FRS was given broad authority to shut down any organization that overstepped the terms of its charter or in any way created "a threat to the sovereignty, political independence, territorial integrity, national

unity, unique character, cultural heritage, and national interests of the Russian Federation.”

Complementing this attack on independent organizations was a renewed effort to build a network loyal to the Kremlin. The Kremlin significantly accelerated its efforts, begun in the early days of Putin’s presidency, to sponsor its own network of organizations (most notoriously the youth organization *Nashi*). The boards of the most prominent of these groups included many of the same individuals, including Sergei Abakumov, Lev Bokeria, and Anatoly Kucherena, creating an interlocking directorate, or perhaps *nomenklatura*, of official social activists to assure their loyalty to the state.

Finally, the Kremlin has encouraged central ministries and all regional governments to form Public Chambers where government officials are expected to consult with representatives of “civil society” in devising and implementing public policy. This network of social chambers culminates with the Public Chamber of the Russian Federation, which consists of 126 notables from various segments of Russian public life. Such public chambers, however, are advisory bodies only, with no power to make binding decisions. Their members, moreover, usually are selected from the top-down and, unsurprisingly, include many members of the interlocking directorate of state-led social activists at the regional and national levels. In Saratov, for example, a body resembling a public chamber is connected with the offices of the governor, the regional дума, the mayor, and the Plenipotentiary for Human Rights, all of which contain many of the same people. Though essentially an instrument of the state, these bodies have provided an opportunity for social organizations to refine legislation in important but non-threatening ways. A few members of the Public Chamber have also used their status to intervene in public controversies. Such interventions have occurred less frequently in the last year or so, however, and the Chamber is increasingly taking on the appearance of just another bureaucratic structure.

It remains to be seen if the effort to dominate society so thoroughly reflects a long-term trend or simply Putin’s personal fetish for control. There have been a few positive signs from President Dmitry Medvedev, including a decree disempowering the FRS and a few nods to strengthen the Public Chamber. Also encouraging has been a rise in public demonstrations, usually among middle-class Russians, against threats to residential property rights and the rights of automobile owners, as well as against some local environmental policies. Still, even if such pressures lead the Medvedev administration to relax somewhat the controls on the public sphere, the institutionalization of current arrangements, particularly with respect to the interlocking directorate of social activists, makes sweeping change unlikely.

## **Policy Implications**

Overall, relations between state and society in both Russia and China seem to reflect deeply embedded institutional forms and practices adapted for a more globalized environment. No one should expect rapid transformations. Western governments and social activists should continue to press for individual human rights but should practice restraint in preaching the gospel of democracy. Such rhetoric will achieve little and may be counterproductive. Instead, they should promote continued contacts and public diplomacy with members of the official and less official networks of social organizations in the hope, particularly in China, that they can incrementally expand the public sphere.

PONARS Eurasia publications are funded through the International Program of Carnegie Corporation of New York. The views expressed in these publications are those of the author alone; publication does not imply endorsement by PONARS Eurasia, Georgetown University, or the Carnegie Corporation.

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