

# Access, Influence and Policy Change: The Multiple Roles of NGOs in Post-Soviet States

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The US government, American foundations, and international agencies have devoted significant sums over the past decade to promoting the activities of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in Russia and other former Soviet states. Has this money been wasted? After all, Russian NGOs are often disorganized and quarrel among themselves. Moreover, the goal of some is to seek personal gain and career advancement, rather than to build the social networks that are prerequisite for a robust civil society. At the same time, NGOs in the former Soviet states have made a difference, albeit in ways perhaps less familiar. To understand fully their multiple roles, we need to think hard about what access and influence mean in relation to NGOs, and how they both may change over time.

## **Access and Influence in the Near Term (1-2 Years)**

In the near term, there are two possible routes for NGO access: 1) contacts or ties to governmental decisionmakers; or 2) a media presence. The former is a well-known channel through which NGOs influence policy. Yet it is arguably less important in post-Soviet Russia, where studies show that the influence of NGOs on actual policy has declined, despite their having access to an array of decision-makers.

How can we explain this state of affairs? In a word, democratization. While Russia falls far short of being a functioning democracy, it is certainly more pluralist than a decade ago. For NGOs, the good news is this increases their access to policymakers. The bad news is this holds true for a wide array of other non-state actors as well--for example, the natural resource monopolies (Lukoil) or financial oligarchs such as Boris Berezovsky (one of Russia's wealthiest businessmen, an unofficial Kremlin advisor and former CIS Executive Secretary).

A brief comparison to the situation of NGOs in Kiev drives home the importance of this access-influence-democratization nexus. In part due to the legacy of the Soviet era and in part owing to conscious choices made by political elites, Ukraine today is a less pluralist society than Russia. Ukrainian NGOs have a pretty tough life--struggling to survive financially and facing a largely hostile and unreformed state apparatus. Yet they have managed to have real, near-term policy influence on several issues.

Consider the reform of citizenship and nationality laws, where Ukraine has crafted one of the more liberal integration regimes in the former Soviet area. Both the constitution and key laws are based on a civic, inclusive conception of citizenship, as opposed to an ethnic and exclusive one (adopted in the former Yugoslavia and several Baltic states). Kiev-based NGOs played important roles influencing the content of the constitution and laws. How did this happen? These NGOs knew the relevant policymakers and sought to persuade them through quiet, behind-the-scenes dialogue. Moreover, when compared to the contemporary Russian case, they faced less competition in this game of policy influence.

The Ukrainian/Russian comparison also highlights another factor affecting NGO access and influence. Put simply, size matters. The political scene in Kiev looks simple and insulated when compared to Moscow; however, smallness has its benefits. The group of informed policymakers and NGO activists in Ukraine is so small that almost everyone knows everyone else. This in turn makes it easier for NGOs to exert influence by exploiting personal contacts. While such a strategy makes less sense in Moscow, it is perhaps a more practical one to promote in the Russian regions, where the authoritarian tendencies of several governors and the smaller community of relevant political actors create a situation similar to that found in Ukraine.

A second way Russian NGOs can exert near-term policy influence is via their media presence. Access means getting a public airing for their views, be it through the convening of news conferences, coverage in newspapers, or TV reports. In this respect, NGOs in Moscow have had some policy impact using a strategy quite different from that sketched above. The game is no longer behind-the-scenes contacts, but an "in your face" mobilization of public and, at times, international pressure. Consider the case of Aleksandr Nikitin, a Russian environmentalist who conducted an assessment of the horrific legacy of Soviet/Russian nuclear activity on the Kola peninsula for a Norwegian NGO. Nikitin was arrested on what many view as trumped-up spying charges; however, Russian and international NGOs have ensured that his was not an open and shut case that resulted in a rapid conviction. Instead, the prosecution has steadily backtracked, to the point where it now recognizes the legitimacy of Nikitin's appealing to an international body, the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg, concerning his case. Key in explaining this turn of events has been the spotlight of unwelcome domestic and international pressure generated by NGOs. Certainly, this NGO activity has not changed core Russian attitudes: negative publicity is still often viewed as subversion. Rather, their policy influence has been at a different level, where they have successfully pressured decision-makers to conduct his trial in accordance with West European juridical norms.

**Policy Implications.** In the near term, the influence of NGOs in post-Soviet Russia is at best erratic and unpredictable. What measurable influence they have depends on a relatively unfettered media. It should thus be a priority to fund international assistance that counters the process whereby ever more media outlets have come under the influence of powerful government actors like Moscow Mayor Luzhkov of the presidential administration, or financial interests such as Berezovsky and Vladimir Guzinsky

(Guzinsky heads MOST Group, a combined banking and media conglomerate that controls several of Russia's most influential newspapers and TV outlets).

### **Access and Influence in the Medium Term (2-4 Years)**

In the medium term, NGO influence via private contacts or media pressure lessens. Instead, their ability to engage policymakers in public debate becomes more important. Access means Russian decisionmakers begin--publicly--to respond to concerns expressed by NGOs. The game here is to point out contradictions between declared government intentions and their implementation, that is, matching words with deeds. To the extent that NGOs shrink the gap separating these two, one can speak about their policy influence.

An example from the human rights area nicely illustrates these medium-term dynamics. An important part of Russia's post-Soviet identity has been to define itself as a law-abiding state, where fundamental human rights are respected. These intentions are reflected both in elements of the 1993 constitution and Russia's stated aim of aligning its policies with common European norms. The latter has meant joining the Council of Europe in 1996 and subsequently ratifying a number of its basic treaties--for example, the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR). More recently, however, a number of Russian and international NGOs have pointed to a growing gap between word and deed--the extent to which current policy is inconsistent with core European human-rights norms.

Consider the death penalty. Its use is explicitly prohibited by the ECHR; yet, death penalty statutes remain on the books in Russia. This inconsistency has been noted by NGOs in a number of public settings--press conferences, international seminars and the like. Initially, the Russian government ignored these criticisms, but more recently it has begun to respond, addressing openly the lack of correspondence between declared intentions and actual policy. This past June, for example, it convened a conference whose main purpose was "to inform the public" what was being done to craft and enact a law formally abolishing the death penalty. To be sure, policymakers had other reasons for holding such a meeting, including maintaining their good standing in European rights institutions. However, the efforts of the Russian NGO community were clearly instrumental as well. Put differently, what you say can come back to haunt you, especially if those words are played back by NGOs, whose stock in trade are the principles and values behind such statements.

**Policy Implications.** The medium-term influence of Russian NGOs is likely to grow. This suggests that Western governments and international agencies should strongly support a continuing policy of seeking alignment of Russian practices with those of European institutions. Not only is this sensible in its own right, it also helps empower Russian NGOs by giving them additional opportunities "to talk the talk" with governmental interlocutors, thus exerting real policy influence as they help close the gap between word and deed.

### **Access and Influence in the Long Term (5+ Years)**

The role of NGOs in the longer term is the most difficult to delineate with precision--in part, because so many other factors come into play as policy horizons are extended. Nonetheless, research on non-governmental actors in other world regions along with emerging patterns within the Russian Federation suggest two important roles: 1) changing the climate of opinion on particular issues; and 2) building the social and intellectual capacity needed to ensure that policy change endures. On the former, access once again means an ability for Russian NGOs to be heard in domestic policy debates. Returning to the death penalty example, the challenge for NGOs has not just been getting the government to match deed with word. Rather, it has also been to change views among the broader public, where many ordinary Russians favor the use of capital punishment. (The reasons for such support are complex, but have much to do with increasing levels of violent crime over the past decade.) The contribution of Russian NGOs to changing these more deeply rooted attitudes is to engage in public dialogue, where, through principled arguments, they explain why European democracies view capital punishment in such negative terms. At best, this is a long and slow process, where influence is measured not so much by the enactment of new policy, but by changing public discourse. In this case, it would mean that more and more Russians come to take for granted that use of the death penalty is simply wrong.

A second long-term role for NGOs is "capacity building," to use a popular phrase. However, I have in mind not so much helping Russia create specific institutions. This is not where the contribution of Russian NGOs lies; rather, they can and should aim to build social networks and intellectual capital.

An example drawn from the international law/judicial policy area illustrates these points. Thanks partly to the efforts of several indigenous NGOs, for the first time ever a Russian judge was recently appointed to the European Court of Human Rights. On a practical level, this event should be welcomed: it will promote a further alignment of Russian and European legal norms. However, more important in the long run are the networking and additional dialogue that follow from such an appointment. It helps to bring Russian professionals into contact with a community of European legal experts whose central concern is to balance national sovereignty with international norms--a legal and intellectual balancing act in which Russians have little recent experience.

Policy Implications. It is simply too early to tell whether Russian NGOs will have long-term policy influence along the lines sketched above. However, if the Western community wishes to stack the deck in favor of such an outcome, it will need to stay the course in Russia--funding and building capacity at these deepest social levels.

## **Conclusions**

NGOs in Russia are neither the standard-bearers of a global civil society, nor the irrelevant and fluffy fringe organizations caricatured by students of realpolitik. Their impact registers between these extremes. To appreciate this fact, we need to adopt more nuanced understandings of changing NGO access and influence. In turn, this will alert us to the multiple roles such actors play. Policy should reflect this reality by itself being multi-faceted. This means not only providing financial assistance when it is necessary and feasible, but also supporting an independent media and Russia's continuing integration with Western institutions.

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