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PUTIN'S TURN TO TRADITIONALISM/NATIONALISM

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ANALYSIS

Conservatism as the Kremlin's New Toolkit: an Ideology at the Lowest Cost

Marlene Laruelle, Washington.

Abstract

Among the major themes that cut across Russia's public debates, the heightened focus on values and identity is a bold demonstration of the entrance of conservative rhetoric into the Kremlin's toolkit. This conservative turn has no ambition to reshape Russian society. It is an ideology of the lowest cost, targeting the conservative majority and hoping to create a new space of depoliticized consensus, which has the added advantage of offering the country a new string to its bow in terms of international branding.

On several occasions over the past two years, highly political issues occupied the Russian public sphere: the anti-Putin protests in 2011, the Pussy Riot trial and law on foreign agents in 2012, and the Moscow electoral campaign, homophobic atmosphere and several anti-migrant riots in 2013. Among the major themes that cut across these public debates, one cannot help but notice the heightened focus on values and identity. Putin's speech at Valdai on September 20, 2013, is a bold demonstration of the entrance of conservatism into the Kremlin's toolkit, usually more for pragmatic reasons than ideological ones. "Today we need new strategies to preserve our identity in a rapidly changing world, a world that has become more open, transparent and interdependent. (…) For us, questions about who we are and who we want to be are increasingly prominent in our society. (…) It is evident that it is impossible to move forward without spiritual, cultural and national self-determination. (…) We can see how many of the Euro-Atlantic countries are actually rejecting their roots, including the Christian values that constitute the basis of Western civilization. They are denying moral principles and all traditional identities: national, cultural, religious and even sexual."[1]

If the identity focus is not new for Russia, the conservative lexicon is, and can be interpreted in at least two ways. The first way is that despite efforts by the Kremlin to de-politicize its citizens and appear to be a non-ideological regime, the country has experienced public debates on social issues such as the relationship between state and society, between society and its elites, and between majorities and minorities (ethnic, sexual, etc.); and in this debate the Kremlin promotes its own voice, which is one of moral conservatism. The second way is that some of these debates make sense abroad. On issues related to traditions, identity, and values, Russia is in tune with some part of the public opinion in Europe and the United States. For the first time since the Soviet collapse, the country is participating in transnational debates that stir Western public opinion.

From Patriotism to Conservatism, from Implicit to Explicit Ideology?

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Kremlin has maintained a cautious or negative position toward any ideological credo. In the 1990s, the enthusiastic calls to Western liberalism were short-lived and the theme of the motherland was gradually rehabilitated. Despite all the changes that came along with Putin's regime, ideological engagement remains a controversial topic that lacks consensus within the ruling elite. The only ideological stance advanced during Putin's first term (2000–04) was that of the reconstruction of the state—the 'power vertical.' Putin also wielded a narrative with a clearly pragmatic orientation—towards modernization. During his second term (2004–08) different ideological wings were structured within United Russia, with explicit references to conservatism emerging, for example by Viktor Zubkov. However, the ruling party seeks to occupy public space via a kind of de-ideologized technocracy and through patriotic rhetoric. Under the presidency of Dmitry Medvedev (2008–12) voices from the Kremlin diversified. The conservative and patriotic disposition was confirmed, but liberal references were revived as well.

Putin's third term in office confirms two trends. Firstly, over the years the Kremlin has gradually developed an ideological meta-narrative while still refusing to elaborate details about it and to systematize its contents. Secondly, this meta-narrative crystallizes values identified as conservative. Does that mean that Putin and his inner circle have changed their worldviews and feel suddenly more confident about the need for an ideology? No, as they remain marked by their pragmatic approaches to domestic issues, their realpolitik in the international sphere, and a nihilistic creed that promotes cynicism, patronism, and consumerism. Yet they have because they have aged. Their legitimacy has eroded and their inability to bring forward a new generation of chosen successors—the Chinese model—is glaring. Thus they hope to compensate for their weakened legiti-

1 See the transcript of the speech at <http://valdaiclub.com/politics/62880.html>.

macy with a surplus of ideology. More importantly, the context in which the regime negotiates with society has evolved. The regime has not changed, while society profoundly transformed during the 2000s. The current conservative turn is an attempt to respond to the widening gap between them.

Maria Lipman, from the Carnegie Center in Moscow, explains that the implicit 'no-intrusion pact' that governed state-society relations during the 2000s (the state does not intervene in the private lives of citizens and in exchange they do not participate in managing the state) was broken by the demonstrations against Putin in winter 2011–12.[2] The system attempts to react with more ideological coercion in order to maintain the status quo. For this, it relies increasingly on the conservative—and silent—majority of the electorate to marginalize the active minority with more liberal values, but also nationalist ones, who want to participate in decision making.

In other words, the system has been forced to make explicit what was previously implicit. But the transition from implicit to explicit is both difficult and dangerous.

It is *difficult* because the ideological consensus in Russia is *ad minima*. There is consensus on the need to promote in the public sphere only what is shared and to limit divisive issues to the private sphere, but not on the substance. If the terms of the substance have to be explained, they are no longer unanimous. There is no agreement within the ruling elites on the question of national identity, the future of federalism, population or migration policies, the reading of the Soviet past, or relations with the Near Abroad and themes linked to it (compatriots, etc.) Nor is there unanimity among those who see the United States and NATO as the main enemy versus those who are most concerned about Islam, or China; or between those who think they can maintain economic development within the status quo versus those who believe that reforms are needed. To formulate ideological content is a complex undertaking indeed, and even more so in an open and diverse country like Russia is today. This can be observed in the debates around whether there should be a single textbook for 20th century history and around the role to be given to the Orthodox Church, among others.

It is *dangerous* because making the social contract explicit implies recognizing ideological differences, while the Russian regime is designed specifically on denying divisions in the public sphere. This also assumes that dissent should be discredited (or suppressed) by the establishment of a coercive apparatus using legal means (the law on 'foreign agents'), technology (internet controls), and security (the services). However, this undertaking is expensive in financial terms, prohibitive in terms of personnel, and not in accordance with the 'nihilistic' creed of the elites. This can be seen with the 2012 law on foreign agents, which remains a virtual tool of repression since the authorities have decided not to advance the underlying logic of the law. Finally, and most importantly, an explicit ideology assumes recognizing a value to political values, while the regime's implicit idea is based on the negation of debating what is the nature of the common good.

Elaborating an ideology would indirectly pave the way for pluralism, and therefore not be favorable to the Kremlin. It would give a certain voice to more liberal positions that the elites could accommodate with relative ease, but also to nationalist theories (coming both from 'ethnic Russians' and 'ethnic minorities') that could jeopardize the stability of the regime. Maintaining the implicit is thus seen by the Kremlin as a way to avoid the real or imagined risk of the dismemberment of the country. This is likely the crux of the conservative turn that has been seen over the last two years. So far the implicit has been formulated through patriotism, which allows for the promotion of shared social values and practices and of collective memory centered on Soviet culture and the Second World War. But seeking to elaborate patriotism opens a Pandora's box of nationalism and could produce a chain reaction between 'Russian nationalism' and 'non-Russian nationalisms.' *The implicit patriotism cannot become an explicit nationalism without endangering the regime, whereas an explicit moral conservatism is, on the contrary, strengthening the statu quo.*

Conservatism as Russia's Brand in the International Sphere

This conservative turn does not develop only in a domestic context; it also became a brand for Russia's reassertion on the international sphere. Russia presentation of itself as a driver of a 'multi-polar world' took shape in the second half of the 1990s with its stance on the Yugoslav wars. After that, Russian diplomatic authorities have positioned themselves in a niche of strict compliance with international laws (denial of the right of interference, military action only with validation of the UN Security Council—except for the recognition of independence for South Ossetia and Abkhazia); and Russia's major role in the Syrian crisis is understood as a crowning achievement. This strategy of branding was strengthened further with Russia's consistent support of all initiatives related to 'dialogues of civilizations', such

2 Maria Lipman, The Kremlin turns Ideological. Where this New Direction Could Lead, in Maria Lipman, Nikolai Petrov, eds, *Russia 2025. Scenarios for the Russian Future* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013): 220–239.

as those held annually in Rhodes, and with senior officials, from Putin himself to Igor Ivanov and Sergey Lavrov highlighting 'traditions and values' openly inspired by the Moscow Patriarchate.

Today Russia's new conservative turn is seen as the country's contribution to denouncing the hypocrisy of U.S. and most European elites, who favor more liberal values than the majority of their citizens. The Kremlin positions itself as a messenger of the silent majorities in the liberal world. It seeks to express what large parts American and European populations actually think and give voice to these silent majorities, which although they are in democratic systems, do not see their vision of the world represented at the highest levels of the state. Hence, the conservative themes raised by Putin and his inner circle are nothing original: they are taken almost verbatim from opinions wielded by the most conservative Republican fringe, some Tea Party members, and a growing number of European right wingers, pushed to a more conservative bent due to the rise of the extreme right. The difference is not in the themes promoted, but in the fact that in Russia, they come from the authorities and can therefore directly shape public policies. In Europe, and to a lesser extent in the United States, they are seen as minority opinions with only episodic access to decision making.

Conservatism as an international brand for Russia already has had an effect, for example in discussions in the OSCE, where Moscow often forms a common front with the Vatican, and increasingly clearly in various European institutions where Moscow can lobby for recognition of legal texts on the Christian heritage of Europe, ethnic majority-minority relations, and about gay marriage. With this new active niche, Russia has become the new darling of not only the European far right (it already was in the early 2000s), but also a large part of the so-called classic right, who has found a new ally in Moscow. Increasing Russophilia among the European, British, French, German, and Italian right is strengthening Putin's idea of a specific 'Voice of Russia.'

Where to Go?

The Kremlin's attempts to put in place a more elaborate ideology are probably doomed to failure. Russian society is sufficiently differentiated, diversified, and integrated to the outside world such that any attempt to impose this kind of top–down dynamic will fail. In addition, the elites cannot agree on the content of the ideology to promote and are not willing to pay the price to a new rigidity that could be imposed on themselves. They also know the transition from implicit to explicit threatens the political cohesion of the country and their own legitimacy.

The Kremlin does not have many options at its disposal to maintain control of the public sphere. The very inspiring theme of nationalism poses inherent problems in terms of its contents (impossible to get unanimous definitions) and endangering both the survival of the regime (the mobilizing potential of nationalism is largely anti-Kremlin) and the country (risk of increased ethnic tensions, and the issue of the integration of migrants). Only moral conservatism can become more explicit, with benign effect. It enjoys a silent majority, respects social hierarchies, does not call the legitimacy of the Kremlin into question, stigmatizes sexual minorities that are less threatening than ethnic minorities, and lacks destabilizing potential. And unlike nationalism, which can be both thought (ideology) and practice (public policies and violence), moral conservatism is primarily a meta-narrative. It can be stated without deeply impacting social practices. It is therefore compatible with the very liberal mores of Russian society, but also accommodates the re-traditionalization taking place in Russia's Muslim regions. In addition, moral conservatism creates channels of interaction with European and American politics that promotes Russia's integration in the international sphere and makes known a 'Russian voice' in the world.

The Kremlin's conservative turn has no ambition to reshape Russian society. The Russian elite do not believe in the power of words to affect the social fabric, and see it more as a toolkit to preserve the status quo of the regime. So it is an ideology of the lowest cost, which has the added advantage of offering the country a new string in its bow in terms of international branding. Even with its lack of domestic success, Russia's conservative turn puts wind in the sails of a worldwide movement reaffirming values and identities.

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ANALYSIS

Putting Traditional Values into Practice: Russia's Anti-Gay Laws

Cai Wilkinson, Burwood.

Abstract

This article examines the rise of so-called anti-gay laws in Russia as a response to international Russian-led support for using "traditional values" as the foundation for human rights norms. Viewed in this way, a logic of moral sovereignty emerges that purports to offer a compromise between international human rights obligations and local socio-cultural norms. However, in the case of anti-gay laws, moral panic over LGBTQ people has made homophobia a political proxy for understandings of traditional values, in the process implicitly legitimizing homophobic violence and discrimination, and setting a dangerous precedent for traditional values to be invoked as a justification for violations of human rights norms.

Traditional Values at Home and Abroad

Since March 2012, Russia has been in the grip of a moral panic, with non-heterosexuality and gender variance portrayed as an existential threat to the country's traditional values. Although not the first "anti-gay" law to be enacted by a municipal or regional legislature – Ryazan Oblast adopted a similar law in 2006 and Arkhangelsk and Kostroma Oblasts followed suit in 2011 – the passing of a law prohibiting "homosexual propaganda" amongst minors by the St Petersburg Duma marked the start of the demonization of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ) people in Russia due to their supposedly deviant sexuality and the danger it posed to the moral health of the nation's children. Reflecting the growing intensity of the panic sparked by the St Petersburg anti-homopropaganda law, a further six regional administrations subsequently passed similar laws, and in June 2013 a federal law was passed outlawing the "propaganda of non-traditional sexual relations to minors".

While international criticism of these laws has focused on fact that they are, by prevailing international human rights norms, a violation of LGBTQ people's human rights, the wording of the federal law hints at the fact that the recent spate of anti-gay legislation is part of a broader shift by the Kremlin to extend the notion of sovereign democracy into the realm of human rights norms and challenge attempts by actors such as the US, EU and United Nations to argue that LGBT rights are human rights. Both domestically and in international fora, Russia has framed its rejection of LGBT rights as being about the protection of traditional values and the need to respect local cultures. Its membership of the UN Human Rights Council between 2009 and 2012 provided it with a platform from which to make its case, and Russia made full use of the opportunity, successfully sponsoring three resolutions over its term in office that sought to legitimize "traditional values of mankind" as the basis for human rights norms.

The final of the three resolutions, which was controversially adopted in September 2012 by a vote of 25–15 with seven abstentions, asserted "that traditional values, especially those shared by all humanity, can be practically applied in the promotion and protection of human rights and upholding human dignity" and called on states to strengthen "the important role of family, community, society and educational institutions in upholding and transmitting these values" via "appropriate positive measures" (A/HRC/21/L.2). As with previous documentation linked to the resolutions, traditional values were defined as "dignity, freedom and responsibility", with equality conspicuously absent. The resolution concluded by requesting that the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights "collect information […] on best practices in the application of traditional values while promoting and protecting human rights".

The Logic of Moral Sovereignty: Prohibiting the Sin, Not the Sinner

Viewed against this backdrop, it is perhaps less surprising that anti-homopropaganda laws have enjoyed strong backing from the Kremlin. To many Russians, such laws offer a "best practice" solution to seemingly intractable tensions between the maintenance of moral values and the push to explicitly recognize the human rights of LGBTQ people on the grounds of non-discrimination. As a number of Russian officials including President Putin have sought to explain, this is achieved using a logic of prohibiting the sin, but not the sinner: being lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or queer is not banned and LGBT citizens enjoy all the same rights and protections as heterosexual citizens, provided they do not transgress societal norms in public.

However, as well as being highly problematic on a practical level, acceptance of such an argument essentially reframes human rights norms and the state's role in their maintenance. Firstly, the enjoyment of human rights is made contingent on the individual's behaviour and conformity with dominant societal values, rather

than being fundamental for all human being regardless of one's identity and resultant moral, social or political status. Secondly, rather than being responsible for ensuring the observance of the principle of non-discrimination for all its citizens, the state's role is now to police its citizens' behaviour and ensure compliance with established moral values, with those failing or refusing to conform to the stipulated standards subject to both societal and legal sanctions.

The combined effect is to fatally undermine the notion of universal fundamental human rights, with stigmatization and subsequent discrimination – the very phenomena that universal human rights norms were designed to combat – now becoming institutionalized as the basis for a regime of moral regulation that seeks to protect the interests of the majority by suppressing the rights of the minority. Yet rather than seeing this dynamic as being at odds with contemporary norms of sovereignty, which require states to protect the rights of all citizens, Russia has cast the adoption of anti-homo-propaganda laws as necessary to maintain the country's "moral sovereignty", which is perceived to be under attack from LGBTQ people and their supporters.

Homophobia as a Proxy for Traditional Values

By portraying the human rights claims of LGBTQ people as an existential threat not only to morality but also Russia's sovereignty and, by extension, national identity, proponents of the laws have been able to make political homophobia a central feature of an increasingly intolerant and populist regime of moral regulation. Central to this undertaking has been the stimulation of moral panic over homosexuality as a source of societal corruption, which has capitalized on the wider fears and anxieties of the Russian population about the future in the face of perceived demographic decline, concerns about living standards and the country's post-Cold War loss of status. Within this narrative, the normalization of homosexuality has been portrayed as the antithesis of Russia's traditional values as an Orthodox Christian and non-Western civilization.

As such, therefore, homophobia functions as a Slavophile political shorthand for national identity and traditional values. This discourse has frequently been evident in justifications of the necessity of anti-gay laws put forward by proponents of such legislation. The initiator of the St Petersburg law, Vitaly Milonov, for example, explained in an interview with *The St. Petersburg Times* in March 2012[1] that his objection to gay parades is because he is "an Orthodox Christian and the demonstration of the sin of Sodom is repellent to me", and went on to illustrate the need to protect Russian children from depraved homosexuals with a vivid anecdote about having seen "photographs where men with all sorts of dildos are running around semi-naked" in Berlin. In case this vision of public debauchery was insufficient to persuade people of the righteousness of his cause, Milonov went on to dismiss international criticism of the law as a violation of human rights obligations as the work of an international gay lobby that has infiltrated the UN and the European Council, arguing that "this is Europe's problem; why should we copy European laws? Not everything that they have in Europe is acceptable for Russia". The implicit message is clear: to be properly Russian is to be Orthodox Christian and against homosexuality.

Similarly, while the wording of the federal bill passed in June did not explicitly mention homosexuality, the law's backers have made it clear that this is what is primarily meant by "non-traditional sexual relations". Significantly the revised phrasing highlights how homophobia is serving a shorthand articulation of what traditional values actually are, and why they are needed. During a TV interview with Vladimir Posner in February 2013,[2] Deputy Elena Mizulina, co-author of the federal law and head of the Committee on Women, Children and Families, explained that in order to solve Russia's demographic crisis, "we must tighten up certain moral values and information […]. This is vital for the birth rate to rise, and for child-rearing to be fully valued". According to such thinking, LGBTQ people are Russian society's very own folk devils, their public presence a sign of everything that is wrong both in Russia and elsewhere, from falling birth rates to rising secularism and the questioning of the government's legitimacy.

Aided by overwhelmingly negative media portrayals of LGBTQ people and the Russian Orthodox Church's hardline condemnation of homosexuality, this argument has found significant resonance with the wider public, and Russia's government and its supporters has been happy to capitalize on it to shore up their position. In the absence of positive and non-sensationalist information about human sexuality and gender, and with 86% of Russians believing that they have never met an LGBTQ person and viewing it as something inherently alien to Russia, the construction of homosexuality as the "other" of traditional values and resultant broad support for greater moral regulation has been driven by fear of the unfamiliar and wider societal anxieties, with little thought for the practical consequences and human costs.

1 <http://sptimes.ru/index.php?action_id=100&story_id=35381>

2 <http://www.kommersant.ru/doc/2134590>

Moral Regulation in Practice: Legitimating Homophobia

Despite the official position that the aim is to eliminate the influence of the sin and not to discriminate against the sinner, there is growing evidence that Russia's anti-gay laws are serving to legitimate homophobic discrimination and violence, with frequently devastating consequences for those who transgress or even dare to question the new moral regime. At its most violent, popular moral regulation has taken the form of hate crimes against men who are, or who are suspected of being gay, such as the brutal rape and murder of 23-year old Vladislav Tornovoi in Volgograd, who was beaten, sodomised with three beer bottles before his assailants smashed his head in with a 20kg rock lest he survive and identify them, and the murder of 38-year old Oleg Serdyuk in Kamchatka, who was stabbed and trampled to death for being gay. Arguably no less brutal have been the rise of far right movements such as Occupy Pedophilia and Occupy Gerontophilia that 'hunt' for gay men and teenagers online, often via dating websites, and then kidnap and abuse them in order to 'cure' their deviant sexuality, posting videos of their victims' ordeals on social media sites as a deterrent to others.

A further tactic that, while not involving physical violence, has been utilized no less effectively for conveying the message that homosexuality is unacceptable and will not be tolerated in the public sphere has been the dismissal, or attempted dismissal, of LGBTQ people or their supporters from their places of work. In May this year journalist Anton Krasovsky was fired after having come out on air and declaring "I am gay, and I am a human being just like Putin and Medvedev", and fellow journalist Oleg Dusaev, who came out on Facebook at the end of August, found his contract with TV channel Kultura unexpectedly and immediately terminated. Several school teachers have also found themselves either fired or pressured to resign due to their "non-traditional" sexuality becoming known, and participation in a protest against the first reading of the federal anti-gay bill outside the State Duma in Moscow in January almost ended in the dismissal of state lycée biology teacher Ilya Kolmanovsky after anonymous complaints were made to the school.

One group that has to all intents and purposes been erased by the adoption of anti-gay laws are LGBTQ minors. As in other countries, LGBTQ youth are particularly vulnerable to bullying and victimization, and the introduction of legislation has further marginalized and isolated them not only by increasing stigmatization but also by putting any adults willing to support them at risk of prosecution. The online project "Children 404" (a play on the 404 error message that appears when an internet page isn't found) on Facebook[3] and VKontakte[4] provides an outlet for LGBTQ youth to share their stories, providing both solidarity and a direct rebuttal to those who maintain that forbidding talk of non-traditional sexual relations will ensure that people will be heterosexual. As sixteen year old Yegor commented in his post, "You know, being gay is not a desire that we children choose. Indeed, it's not a desire at all".

Conclusion: Putting Sexual Citizenship Back in the Closet

With the exception of a small number of LGBTQ activists, even before the advent of Russia's anti-gays laws being "out" about one's sexuality was very much the exception rather than the norm. The introduction of legislation seeking to keep LGBTQ people firmly behind a closed and policed closet door, however, marks an attempt by Russia to actively exclude sexuality from norms of human rights norms and, by extension, citizenship. While this move is internally coherent, representing the operationalization of traditional values as a basis for human rights, in practice it sets a dangerous precedent for the denial of the rights of citizenship to any group at odds with traditional values, as well as encouraging the use of moral vigilantism to censure dissent of any kind.

About the Author

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Further Reading:

- Francesca Stella, Queer Space, 'Pride, and Shame in Moscow', *Slavic Review*, vol. 72, no. 3, 2013, pp. 458–480.
- Alexander Kondakov, 'Resisting the Silence: The Use of Tolerance and Equality Arguments by Gay and Lesbian Activist Groups in Russia', *Canadian Journal of Law and Society,* FirstView Article, 2013, pp. 1–22.

3 <https://www.facebook.com/children.404?fref=ts>

4 <http://vk.com/deti404>

ANALYSIS

Kremlin Nationalism versus Russia's NGOs

Robert Orttung, Washington

Abstract

Since his second term as president, Vladimir Putin has sought to discredit the handful of Russian independent non-governmental organizations that deal with sensitive topics by branding them as servants of foreign sponsors who undermine Russian sovereignty and national interests. While the campaign has varied in intensity over time, it remains a constant theme of regime politics. These efforts serve the primary goal of blocking the rise of an alternative to the incumbent authorities, but have stunted the development of Russian civil society and damaged Russia's international image.

Fear of an Alternative Source of Power

In order to ensure their survival, authoritarian regimes work to guarantee that no alternative base of political power emerges in their societies. Upon coming to power, Vladimir Putin and his collaborators quickly eliminated any potential threats that emanated from independent media, regional leaders, the oligarchs, and non-cooperative political parties.

Having weakened the political influence of these groups, the Kremlin set its sights on non-governmental organizations (NGOs) addressing issues that the regime considered potentially threatening to its survival. Ukraine's Orange Revolution in December 2004 is often seen as a turning point in the Kremlin's campaign against Russia's NGOs because the Kremlin interpreted the uprising in its neighbor as driven by Western-financed NGOs. But even before that event Putin was sounding the alarm about the nature of independent groups operating in Russian society. In his annual address to the Russian parliament on May 26, 2004, Putin had already begun to emphasize the themes that he would rely on for the next decade: NGOs were funded by foreign sources and were pursuing the interests of those foreigners in ways that, he implied, undermined Russian sovereignty and contradicted Russia's national interest. He said,

"In our country, there are thousands of public associations and unions that work constructively. But not all of the organizations are oriented towards standing up for people's real interests. For some of them, the priority is to receive financing from influential foreign foundations. Others serve dubious group and commercial interests. And the most serious problems of the country and its citizens remain unnoticed."[1]

Putin noted in 2004 that these problems are "unavoidable and of a temporary nature" and he did not want to criticize all of civil society. In his conception of proper state-society relations, civil society should perform the functions "the state should not or is unable to perform effectively." In other words, NGOs should deal with social issues, such as caring for orphans, while steering far clear of topics that could potentially undermine the ability of the current elites to hold on to their positions of power and wealth.

Such statements are meant to warn people away from becoming involved in political life. Putin's threats fall on fertile soil in Russia. The Soviet-era Communist Party monopoly on power left a legacy in which there was little tradition of joining groups, volunteerism, or activism for personal reasons or genuine interest. The features of Soviet life that most closely resembled such activity, membership in the Komsomol or *subotniki*, were typically coerced and seen as "political" since the goal was to support the Party. Today many people remain apathetic, believing that ordinary individuals have little ability to change anything anyway.

The Orange Revolution and Beyond

Even though the pressure on NGOs had begun earlier, the Orange Revolution served to intensify Kremlin action against social organizations. A strict new law on foreign and domestic NGOs went into effect on April 18, 2006. This law required NGOs to supply extensive amounts of information to the authorities and go through a complicated re-registration process. It roused considerable protest from groups working in Russia at the time.

Russia's dependent courts also provided the regime with a useful tool against citizen activism—filing complicated cases, that are frequently spurious or trumped up, against NGO leaders forced them to spend their time on trial defending themselves rather than engaging in civic activity. Even if they avoided the always present specter of jail, the loss of time in the courtroom and preparing their defense was costly in terms of what they could have been doing otherwise.

One trick of modern authoritarian regimes is to only vaguely define what they don't like. Since shortly after coming to power, Putin has repeatedly denounced

1 The Russian text is available here: <http://www.regnum.ru/news/267244.html> An English translation of the speech is available here: <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/library/report/2004/putin-federalassembly_2004.htm>.

NGOs for engaging in "political activities." Such activities have included topics like election monitoring, human rights, Chechnya, police reform, corruption, but not only these. The point is that there is no bright red line between what is and is not allowed. The content of "political activity" depends on what the authorities decide at any given moment. The idea behind this approach is to outsource repression so that people effectively repress themselves. Activists who do not know exactly what the rules are will seek to protect their liberty by reducing the scope of their involvement in order to avoid the possibility of going to jail or being beaten by law enforcement officers. Such "self-policing" also helpfully saves resources for the elites who control the state. Moreover, ambiguity leaves the door open for abuse.

In Russia, there are few foundations or sources of funds besides the state that can help finance NGO activities. The lack of resources domestically, and the possibility of winning relatively large grants from abroad, drove some groups to seek foreign funding. Naturally, the priorities of the foreign funders did not always match the agenda of the local groups and, in some cases, the groups had to bend their proposals to meet the terms of the Western foundations. Before his arrest in 2003, Mikhail Khodorkovsky's Open Russia Foundation began funding a variety of groups, but the oligarch's imprisonment sent a strong signal to other wealthy Russians not to follow his example. Seeking to avoid a similar fate, prudent high-wealth Russians keep their money abroad. They don't generally invest in charity unless directed to do so by powerful officials. Nevertheless, there are some signs of change. Anti-corruption blogger and politician Alexey Navalny and Olga Romanova, who founded Russia Behind Bars to defend businessmen imprisoned by opponents seeking to steal their property, have succeeded in convincing Russian citizens to contribute money to causes that they believe are worthy.

In addition to limiting domestic sources, the Kremlin also made it more difficult for foreign organizations to work in Russia, closing offices of the British Council in St. Petersburg and Yekaterinburg in 2007, leaving only one in Moscow. Additionally, Russia forced the U.S. Agency for International Development to stop its activities by October 1, 2012 and expelled the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) at the end of that year. USAID had spent nearly $3 billion on aid and democracy programs over two decades in Russia. Many foreign donors lost their tax exempt status in 2008, including the International Red Cross, World Wildlife Fund, and the Ford Foundation.

By questioning the patriotism of the civil society groups, Putin signaled to regional leaders and tax collectors that they were a suitable target for repressive measures. Groups that the Kremlin does not like face visits from the security police and regional authorities. Often they lose their leases and find it hard to rent space for their offices. In contrast to the U.S., where there are clear rules on what taxes non-profit corporations do and do not pay, Russian legislation is purposely confusing so that all groups are in violation of one provision or another at any given time. This legal complexity makes them vulnerable to prosecution.

It is rare for the Kremlin to actually shut down a NGO, but it happens. On October 13, 2006, a Nizhny Novgorod court shut the Russian-Chechen Friendship Society. The court ruled that the group's leader Stanislav Dmitrievsky did not have a right to lead the organization because he had been convicted of "extremism" earlier in the year. In 2013, the authorities dissolved the vote monitoring agency Golos (discussed in detail below).

In addition to using repressive measures and creating an atmosphere of fear, the Kremlin has tried to coop civil society groups. The Kremlin now provides considerable funding for grants that NGOs can win, including about $258 million in the 2013 federal state budget. Naturally, the vast majority of the grants are directed to groups who are non-threatening to the political elite. In a situation where other sources of funding are scarce, controlling the purse strings means determining what kind of groups can exist. The Kremlin has also set up a variety of official institutions, such as the Civic Forum and Public Chamber, which are designed to make it easier for the state to control the work of the NGOs.

New Repressive Measures

Protest activities began building in Russia in 2010, with a huge rally in Kaliningrad early in the year, reinvigorating the usually dormant Russian society. Most of the causes behind these actions were focused on local abuses of power, but the outbreak of such concerns across the country started to look like a growing trend. Other popular actions focused on the Khimki forest and the official abuse of flashing lights to cut through urban traffic jams. Discontent in the Far East also grew. These actions culminated in December 2011 and May 2012 with massive protests against Putin's decision to replace Medvedev as president and election abuses in the parliamentary and presidential elections.

Putin, who had relied on the population's passivity as a key element in maintaining power, opened his third presidential term with a major offensive to bring this spontaneous activity back under control. In July 2012, a new law returned to the well-worn discourse of accusing the NGOs of engaging in "political activity" at the bidding of foreign funders, now requiring all NGOs that accepted funding from abroad to register as "foreign agents." The motive, as usual, was to discredit the

NGOs in the eyes of the public and therefore give the state more control over them. According to the text of the law, political activity includes seeking to change state policy and influencing public opinion with that aim, but the vagueness of that formulation gave the regime great discretion in determining whom to punish.

Given the vague nature of the law, the way that the authorities implemented it was key to determining its impact on Russia's NGOs. Initially, the Justice Ministry did not seem interested in enforcing the law and NGOs generally engaged in a campaign of civil disobedience by refusing to register as "foreign agents." But then Putin made it clear that he wanted to see action, telling the FSB leadership on February 14, 2013, that the NGO laws must be enforced. The Prosecutor's Office immediately began investigating hundreds of NGOs. Tax, fire, and labor inspectors also began paying visits to the organizations, looking for violations. On July 10, General Procurator Yurii Chaika told the Federation Council that he had identified 22 non-commercial organizations involved in political activity—"foreign agents"—in Russia.[2] He said that they had received more than 800 million rubles between 2010–13 according to their own record books. He claimed that the number of foreign agents in reality was much greater than he was able to identify because they used various means to disguise their work.

One of the clear targets of the campaign was Golos, which monitors elections and publicizes evidence of manipulations and fraud. In April 2013, the Justice Ministry declared that Golos had improperly failed to register as a foreign agent and then took the rare step of dissolving the organization on June 6, 2013. Its director fled the country. However, despite all this, members of the organization reestablished the group on July 5, 2013, set up a new web site (<http://www.golosinfo.org/>), and helped to monitor the Moscow September 2013 mayoral elections.

Despite the temporary closing of Golos, the campaign against "foreign agents" seemed to peter out by the end of the summer, after Putin had called for revisions in the law that would focus the attention of law enforcement agencies on political organizations while not causing trouble for groups that deal with social or healthcare issues.[3] What had seemed like an intense crackdown, suddenly lost steam, leaving the NGOs to continue working, but always in doubt about their ultimate fate.

In their evaluation of the first year of the law, the Institute for Contemporary Development's Yevgeniy Gontmakher claimed that it had harmed charity work in Russia and undermined the authorities' prestige.[4] He noted, for example, that Aleksandr Zamaryanov, executive director of the Kostroma Center for the Support of Public Initiatives was fined 100,000 rubles ($3,120) for inviting a foreign diplomat to a roundtable discussion and that the Muravyevka Park for Sustainable Development, which studies and protects rare cranes in the Far East, was declared a "foreign agent" for receiving a grant from aboard. These examples demonstrated the absurdity of the law.

Only when 30 people on a Greenpeace ship staged an assault on a Russian offshore Arctic oil drilling platform in September, did the Russian regime bare its teeth again. Security officers boarded the ship in international waters, arrested all on board, including journalists, and charged them with piracy. As of this writing, all were still in jail and had been denied bail, despite the protests of various Western governments and organizations. By attacking the source of Russia's future oil and implicitly questioning Russian sovereignty over the Arctic, the environmentalists had struck at Putin's most sensitive spot. Thanks to its harsh crackdown, Russia is going to pay a price in terms of its international reputation—coverage of protests around the world in support of the "Greenpeace 30" ran in tandem with the launch of the Sochi 2014 Olympic torch in Red Square and focused media attention on the environmental impact of developing resources in the Arctic, a subject energy companies would rather address in less prominent venues. Since the thirty crew members represent 18 countries, the bad press is likely to be global: Brazil's President Dilma Rousseff has already offered all support to free Brazilian activist Ana Paula Maciel.

Russia's Resilient NGO Community

Not all problems for NGOs in Russia come from the state. Russian NGOs do not always do a good job of explaining to Russian citizens what they are doing or why it is necessary. Helping family and friends rather than organized groups remains the most popular form of charity in Russia. Furthermore, some NGOs are more interested in Western grants rather than local concerns. Groups in the capital cities of Moscow and St. Petersburg often have different interests and concerns than those in the regions. Overall, these voluntary organizations have yet to become a respected part of the country's social fabric.

Despite all the problems they face, most of Russia's well known NGOs continue to operate. Groups like Memorial, the Moscow Helsinki Group, Soldiers Mothers Committees, the Levada Center, Agora, Transparency International, and Bellona press on with their usual

2 <http://genproc.gov.ru/smi/interview_and_appearences/appearences/83568/>

3 <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/07/04/us-russia-ngos-putin-idUSBRE9630N920130704>

4 <http://www.kommersant.ru/doc/2310097?isSearch=True>

activities. Moreover, less prominently, there are numerous groups involved in a variety of activities such as protecting the environment, defending historic buildings from demolition, ensuring workers' rights, and promoting various leisure and professional activities.

The Ministry of Justice's online database on October 15, 2013 included 225,211 registered non-commercial organizations (416,517 total records minus 191,306 which had been excluded) (<http://unro.minjust.ru/NKOs.aspx>). Unfortunately, there is no systematic data on which of these organizations are actually operating, what their activities are, how effectively they influence state policy or promote social change, questions that are complicated in any society.

Of course, it is hard to say how much activity the state repressive apparatus has prevented from happening. In some cases, individuals work together in organizations that never seek formal state registration. Volunteerism has been growing as ordinary people seek to help victims of the fires and floods that have afflicted Russia in recent years. Navalny's mayoral campaign in the summer of 2013 also sparked an enormous amount of grassroots activism, bringing a new generation of Muscovites into the political process even if the overall election was neither free nor fair. But given the harsh and unpredictable actions of the Putinist Kremlin against civil society, few new organizations are likely to launch activities in the near future.

About the Author:
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Recommended Reading
Miriam Lanskoy and Elspeth Suthers, "Putin versus Civil Society: Outlawing the Opposition," *Journal of Democracy* 24:3, July 2013.

Figure 1: How Would You Rate the Activities of Non-Commercial Organizations in Russia?

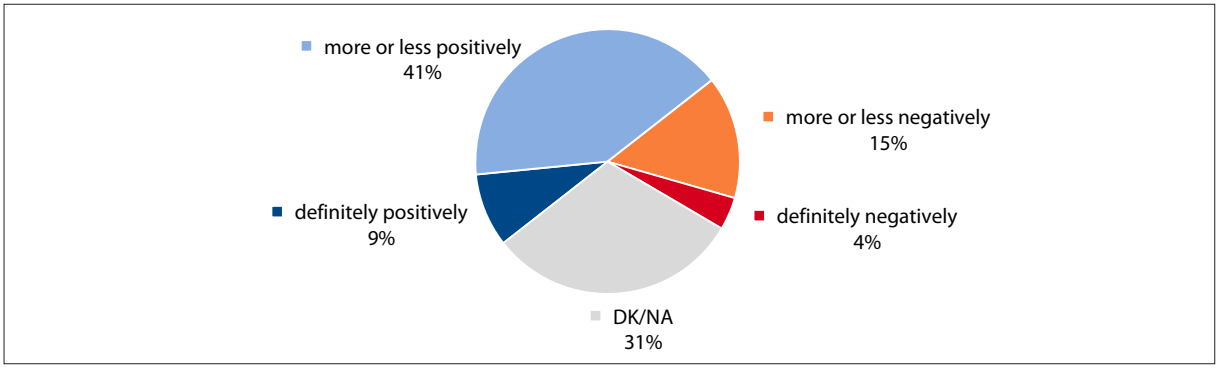
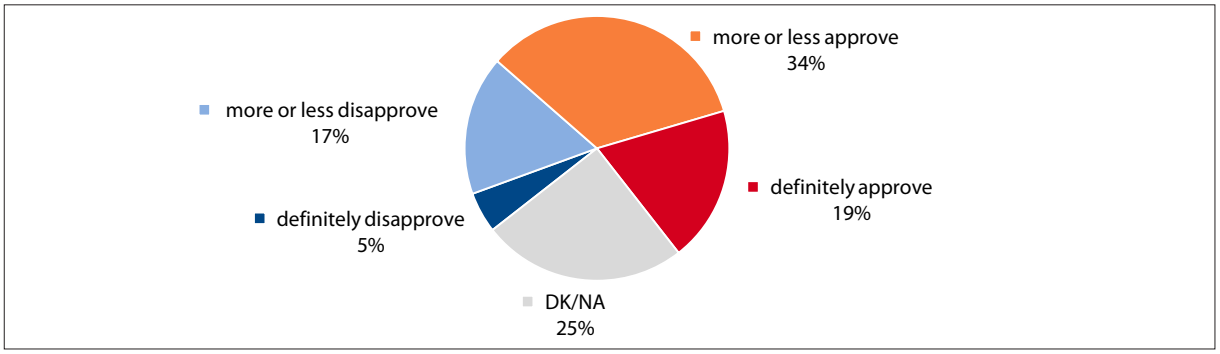


Figure 2: Do You Approve of Harsh Sanctions, Including Liquidation of the Organization, Against Non-Commercial Organizations Which Receive Funds from Abroad But Do Not Register as "Foreign Agents"?



Source: representative opinion poll by Levada Center, 20–24 June 2013, <http://www.levada.ru/11-07-2013/otnoshenie-k-nko>

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The Russian Analytical Digest is a bi-weekly internet publication jointly produced by the Research Centre for East European Studies [Forschungsstelle Osteuropa] at the University of Bremen (www.forschungsstelle.uni-bremen.de), the Center for Security Studies (CSS) at the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology Zurich (ETH Zurich), the Resource Security Institute, the Institute of History at the University of Zurich (http://www.hist.uzh.ch/) and the Institute for European, Russian and Eurasian Studies at The George Washington University. It is supported by the German Association for East European Studies (DGO). The Digest draws on contributions to the German-language Russland-Analysen (www.laender-analysen.de/russland), the CSS analytical network on Russia and Eurasia (www.css.ethz.ch/rad), and the Russian Regional Report. The Russian Analytical Digest covers political, economic, and social developments in Russia and its regions, and looks at Russia's role in international relations.

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Resource Security Institute
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