Interrelations of the “social” and the “political” in Russian civil society

This panel seeks to shed light into the debate about the role of civil society in contemporary Russia. Special attention will be paid to approaches to society and modes of actions within Russian NGOs and their interactions with governmental and international environments. The four papers of the panel study how and to which extent Russian NGOs are able to transform the situation of narrow political opportunities in order to engage in policy-making without losing their social mandate.

Contemporary Russian civil society more or less originates in numerous discussion groups, self-help relations and distribution networks, which existed during the Soviet regime on a very informal level underneath official government structures of the organization of public everyday life. Whereas Gorbachev’s perestroika opened up the public sphere to the expression and representation of citizen’s rights and interests, the harsh economic transformation and the state’s fall-out to fulfill basic welfare provisions at all levels during the 1990s give way to the rise of a vast field of grass-roots self-help groups and NGOs striving to compensate for the state’s failure to provide medical and social services.

The state and progress of civil society in Russia was and still is closely related to the general development of Russian politics and society. On the one hand, Russia’s integration into the political and economic world system has brought wide expectations of its democratic and capitalistic development and international economic support was coupled with democracy promotion and support for the building of an independent civil society. On the other hand, Russia followed an somewhat headstrong path by mixing up democratic and corporate features with prevailing soviet patterns of governance and social and culture organization, which was titled variably from “guided democracy” (Brown 2001) to “hybrid regime” (Robertson 2011) and “competitive-authoritarianism” (Levitsky and Way 2010). One of the mean features is strong government control over the civil sphere and an increasing interrelation of civil society activities with state structures, while keeping as much as possible international influence out of the game (Sundstrom and Henry 2006).

While studies showed that the Russian government envisages civil society primarily as loyal to the state and focused on solving social problems (Belokurova 2010), other authors argued that Russian citizens are increasingly aware of their political mandate (Koesel and Bunce 2012). The recent protest wave of 2011/12 and its decline support to the hypothesis that protest movements addressing problems of everyday life are more attractive and successful compared to parties and organizations with abstract goals, such as political liberalization (Evans 2012). Accordingly, recent studies demonstrate how contentious civil activism and protests arise from civil initiatives with regard to local social grievances (Clemént et al. 2010). In this respect, scholars of Russian civil society have proposed, that it has to be independent or even opposed to the government in order to reach efficiency and support democratic development (Evans 2006). But several case studies have shown, that civil society’s interaction and even intermittence with state structures (Fröhlich 2012, Kulmala 2013) offer opportunities for positive developments.

Against that background, the panel seeks to investigate Russian NGOs’ capability of representing the interests and rights of citizens and of influencing policy-making processes. The four presentations, which will look at different topical areas (e.g. HIV/Aids and disability) reveal that the activities of Russian NGOs often are located in a spectrum of service provision and advocacy, putting them into a tension between social and political approaches to civil activity. Therefore, the panel aims to re-evaluate the dilemma of governance in Russia: How can Russian NGOs transform their strong expertise with regard to social support and inclusion of the weak and disadvantaged into influence upon political decision-making under conditions of weak interest representation in policy-making and inappropriate instruments of state-civil society cooperation?

NGO Interaction with Government Agencies and NGO’s Role in Alleviation of Social Problems in Russia
From a typological perspective, judging by the current ratio of public expenditure funding sources (Salamon & Anheier, 1998), Russia is characterized by the social-democratic nonprofit regime. Public expenditure has a crucial role in the funding of social needs. In 2011, public expenditure constituted 20.7 per cent of Russia’s GDP (Romanova, Rudnik, Matskevich, 2012, p. 11). At the same time, citizens’ satisfaction with sectors of the social sphere is rather low (Yakobson, L. I., Mersiyanova, I. V., 2012, p. 5).

Over the past seven years, public expenditure for social needs tripled. However, by the estimate of a large team of experts, which worked in 2011–12 by order of the Russian Federation President, it was not enough to fund the commitments made by the government (Akindinova, N. V. et al., 2013). Citizens’ payments, both official and shadow (informal, grey or black payments), only partially make up for the budget deficit. For example, according to the law, every Russian citizen is entitled to free, timely and highly qualified medical aid. However, public expenditure related to medical care amounts to only 3.7 percent of GDP (Romanova, Rudnik, Matskevich, 2012, p. 11), as compared to 7.8 per cent typical of OECD states (Thomson, Foubister, Mossialos, 2010). Owing to payments made by patients, an additional 2.1 per cent of GDP is channeled to the sector, which still makes it a partial solution. There is a critical lack of public nursing homes and accommodations for elderly people. Social welfare benefits to poor families with children are below the subsistence level. This list of similarly unresolved issues is far from exhaustive.

The above examples make it apparent how important the role of NGOs and charities could be in alleviating people’s problems. To date, however, this role is not so prominent. According to a 2009 survey conducted by CSCSNS NRU HSE under the Johns Hopkins Comparative Nonprofit Sector Project, employment in the nonprofit sector makes only 0.9 per cent of the total labor force, whereas the number of NPOs is significant.

The study will suggest the NGO typology based on the way of interaction with government of all levels (municipal, regional, federal). It will also discuss approaches to the NGO role (both potential and actual) in the alleviation of social issues in Russia. The empirical basis of the article was developed within the framework of the civil society monitoring which CSCSNS has conducted with support from the Basic Research Program of NRU HSE since 2006. The data were obtained through all-Russia population surveys as well as NGO- and expert surveys. Particularly, this includes:

1) Data of the all-Russia NGO survey performed through in-person, semi-structured interviews of NGO leaders in the fall of 2012. The sample included 1,005 NGOs. The survey conducted in 33 components of the Russian Federation used a quota sample, which included representative quotas relating to NGOs’ legal form and the year of registration. Participant regions were selected based on the typology of Russian Federation components, which included three types of indicators: urbanization index, nonprofit sector development index (in quantitative terms), and the Russian Federation component economic development indicator as specified by the ratio of gross per capita regional product (GpCRP) to an average for Russia.

2) A survey of federal-level opinion leaders that included 300 representatives of some 41 federal agencies and ministries, 100 industrial enterprises based in Moscow and Moscow area as well as deputies of the four factions represented in the State Duma and senators from all seven federal districts.

Post-Soviet “Political”? The Role of (Socially Oriented) Civil Society Organizations in Small-town Russia
The paper contributes to the large set of literature concerning civil society development in post-Soviet Russia. More precisely, I focus on the state-society relationship in contemporary Russia by analyzing the role of the studied organizations by looking at their relationship on the one hand with the state structures and on the other hand with the ordinary citizens. The paper investigates state-society interaction with focusing to a few issues that have been largely neglected by the previous scholarship. First, I investigate the role of civil society organizations at the local, municipal level in contemporary Russia, while most of the studies have concentrated on the federal level policies or on the level of the regional capitals. The municipal level is, however, a logical level for state-society analyses since it is the closest locus of the state from the viewpoint of citizens. This level of government is also charged with the resolution of practical problems offers the greatest scope for collaboration with civil society. Second, I investigate the question of state-society interrelations in a context of small-town Russia. Approximately half of the Russian population lives in small towns and the daily experience of these individuals has been neglected by scholarship that focuses on major urban centers. Finally, rather than looking narrowly at advocacy groups, I include welfare-oriented associations, filling a gap in the literature (Cf. Kulmala 2013.).

In my analysis, I approach the state-society relationship with the concepts of complementary, supplementary and adversarial role of civil society in relation to the state, each of which casts presuppositions how the state and (civil) society are positioned in relation to each other (Anheier 2009). This relationship, thus, is tightly connected to the question of the role assigned to civil society organizations – in other words, to the functions of these organizations. Usually the theoretical literature distinguishes two separate categories of service-oriented organizations and policy/advocacy organizations (Cf. Clemens 2006; Young 2006). In Russian context, it seems the overwhelmingly majority of citizens’ organizations that fall into the first category are socially oriented organizations (CIVICUS 2007; Cook & Vinogradova 2006). These organizations have been most often depicted as apolitical helpers of the state, which has been argued as contributing to the weakness of Russian civil society (see e.g. Sundstrom and Henry 2006). Thus, the “political potential” of such organizations has remained with remote analytical attention.

In my analysis, I do not assume any predetermined function or role for the studied organizations. Instead, I am taking them as they are – whether they are active in policy/advocacy work, in service provision or in other fields – and try to understand how their orientation impacts their relations with the local state structures and ordinary citizens. Furthermore, my explicit aim is to understand how “political” and “social” might interconnect in the work of the studied organizations. These two aspects of services (social) and advocacy (political) have been rarely examined in the same study, which is a limitation that might simplify our picture of the roles and functions of Russian civil society organizations (as in any other context). My particular aim is to uncover what qualifies political and what can be understood as a political action in the given setting. Therefore, my theoretical aim is to merge the so-called democratization and welfare frameworks in order to understand the prevailing state-society relationship in the context of post-Soviet Russia. (Cf. Kulmala 2013.)

The analysis builds on an extensive ethnographic fieldwork in one municipality, in the Sortavala municipal district of the Republic of Karelia. The fieldwork has been conducted in 2007-2009 with follow-up visits in 2012-2013.

“Attraction and rejection“ - Diffusion of global models of disability and advocacy into Russian civil society organizations

This paper studies models of disability and modes of action of disability NGOs in contemporary Russia. One focus of the analysis is on certain patterns of diffusion of global, foremost western definitions and models of disability connected to political concepts of human rights and advocacy and their entanglement with historical rooted approaches to the disability issue. The second focus
envisages contextual factors, such as the cultural and political embeddedness of NGO development and of civil, non-state activity in the Russian society.

The presented study relates to the discussion of the impact of international support for post-soviet civil society. It questions one-sided approaches which either heavily criticize foreign influence and international partnerships (e.g. Sampson 2002, Henderson 2002) or observe only weakness and lack of influence of Russian NGOs (e.g. Howard 2003). Instead, in line with contextualizing approaches (Mercer 2002), this paper proposes a close-up account and argues that the extent of diffusion of international models and modes of action depends on historical and contextual, such as political, social, spatial and cultural factors. These provide opportunities and constrains as well as mind sets for appropriate actions (Henry 2006) in relation to international and domestic discourses and actors. Therefore, the translation of global models into local contexts and practices is not, as theories of global diffusion suggest (e.g. Meyer et al. 1997), a straightforward process executed by international agents. Rather, Russian NGOs elaborate the degree of implementation of global models and norms on the local level by being attracted or rejecting them according to their perceived opportunities and constrains.

The responsiveness to international and domestic environments hinges on contextual factors of the NGO’s time of foundation and its interrelation with international and state structures (Fröhlich 2012). During the turbulent and economically depressive 1990s disability NGOs were often founded out of or in close relationship with state structures and institutions. These quasi-state NGOs and parent’s organizations fulfilled the role of social service providers and compensated the lack of state provision. But other NGOs developed out of self-help initiatives due to financial and ideological support by international donors and partnerships. They adopted a human rights approach and advocated for political and social changes of society. Both groups of NGO perceive global models and norms in different ways with regard to their perception of appropriateness in relation to their political, social, economic and cultural embeddedness (see also Jowitt 1992).

Interviews in NGOs in four Russian cities, taken during fieldwork in Perm, Nizhny Novgorod, St. Petersburg and Moscow in 2009 and 2010, reveal different models of disability and modes of action among their associates, which to various degrees relate to notions of social services provision and human rights protection. This can be related to social and cultural patterns in the organizational environments, opening and closing opportunities for adapting of international models of disability and realizing them by advocacy and empowerment.

This qualitative study of NGOs in the field of disability relates, one the hand, to the question of their role in transnational diffusion processes and, on the other, to their impact on holding the state accountable for social and political issues. Therefore, this paper contributes to the literature both on transnational governance and development of civil society in post-communist states.

**Why do they care? Framing in social-sector NGOs in Russia**

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Civil society actors fulfill many functions in society. In third-sector research their arena is defined as between the state and the market. Ideally, civil society is understood as an independent space that allows citizens to come together, organize themselves and deal with topics of their individual concern and interest. The issue areas and activities of civil society organisations can be various. They range from health care, social policy to environmental protection, education, leisure time activities and cultural heritage. Common to all civil society organisations is that they are based on a shared understanding of a meaningful and fulfilling activity that joins their members and supporters.

In a democratic political system, various channels of societal interest representation and mediation exist. Political parties play a prominent role in responding to public concerns, in defending the interests of the population groups, in formulating positions and in finding solutions
in the political arena. Non-democratic political systems are characterized by the fact that they lack functioning forms of political interest representation and mediation. In countries such as Russia, political parties are largely stripped off their function of societal intermediates. They are not effective in responding to citizens’ concern and achieving a “common good”. What does this mean for civil society organisations?

The working context for civil society organisations in a non-democratic or hybrid political regime differs from that of a democratic political regime. The space for civil society organisations is much less independent and autonomous than prevalent civil society theories suggest. As a result, civil society organisations cannot act freely and face different form of state domination and/or cooptation. However, the organisations also react to missing link between society and the state. Due to the mal-functioning of political interest mediation, civil society actors remain as sole intermediates in society. Hence, in non-democratic political regime, civil society inevitably becomes more politicized than in a democratic political regime.

This paper studies how social-sector NGOs in Russia deal with this situation. It studies how the organisations define their goals and activities and create credibility for themselves and for society. The paper builds upon empirical research on NGOs that are active in the field of HIV/AIDS in Russia, but seeks to broaden the perspective on social-sector NGOs in general. The paper uses the concept of “framing” to explain how these organisations define their goals and rationale for existence. “Why do we care?” is thereby a question that arises on a daily basis. The organisations need to explain what the overarching “common good” of their activities is. In addition, they need to convince a broader part of society about the relevance of their cause and striving. From a theoretical perspective the paper also seeks to contribute to the debate on legitimacy. How can legitimacy be defined for civil society actors, and what kind of answers to the organisations themselves give?