

A Snapshot of Russian Civil Society Through the Lens of Women's Non-Government Organizations

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How have non-government organizations (NGOs) adapted to the evolving conditions in civil society, namely funding sources, legislation, and political discourse? Why have some NGOs drawn closer to the state in recent years while others have not? What accounts for the rise of service-providing NGOs and ostensible fall in human rights and advocacy organizations? In recent years, civil society has become more divided and state-directed than ever before. With new federal legislation that creates both incentivizing and penalizing categories for NGOs, the state attempts to prune civil society back, according to its goals and ostensible social service needs.

The United Nations defines civil society as the “‘third sector’ of society”.¹ Accordingly, civil society is made up of civil society organizations (CSOs) and non-government organizations (NGOs) and occupies a place in society distinct of government and the private sector. In my paper, I explore the current relationship between the Russian state and third sector by analyzing 10 women's NGOs and the role that funding, legislation, and social principles plays in defining their interactions.

By compiling figures reported by the Russian Ministry of Justice, Presidential Grants for Civil Society Development Foundation, and Civic Council of the Russian Federation, I determined that the Russian state is an increasingly important sponsor of civil society. While the government undeniably seeks to promote a robust service-oriented civil society, it *selectively* supports organizations. The Russian state tends to support NGOs which focus on “traditional policy issues” such as supporting the sick, elderly, needy children, and religious organizations as opposed to human rights or politically active groups.² In addition, recent “foreign agents” laws in 2012 targeted human rights, research and advocacy NGOs that were perceived as interfering with domestic politics.³ Carnegie Endowment for International Peace fellow Saskia Brechenmacher calls this a “powerful tool to deplete organizations that are already starved for funding”.⁴

The complex domestic perception of the Russian women's movement in the past and present also presents difficulties for the survival of some women's NGOs in Russia which do not align with the state's conceptions of women and gender-specific issues. In my paper I also explore the specific barriers that women's NGOs face in Russia.