

The Politics of Small Steps: Influence Strategies of Social Sector NGOs in Russia

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Paper for the HSE International Academic Conference, Moscow, 19-21 April 2016

Abstract

Given the widespread climate of repression suggested by the recent passage of the “foreign agent law” in Russia, it might easily be assumed that the role of NGOs is limited to social service delivery. However, despite the difficult policy environment in Russia, NGOs have, however, developed a variety of strategies for policy influence, though these strategies often differ from those of NGOs in a pluralistic system.

The article aims to analyze the influence strategies of social sector NGOs in Russia. Based on the advocacy coalition framework, it will show in which ways and under which conditions Russian NGOs are able to influence policy making. The paper will focus both on regional NGOs and on national level (umbrella, network, or infrastructure) NGOs.

Introduction

In many Russian regions, new institutions have been created that are meant to enable the partnership between the legislative, the regional administration and civil society actors. These forms of institutionalized cooperation include permanent roundtables, consultative councils, regional or local grant competitions for social projects and the institutionalized cooperation in externally funded social projects. In addressing social problems, nonprofit organizations have often played a pioneer role and are today more

and more accepted as partners of the state, while at the same time facing multiple barriers in terms of their institutional context, organizational development and participation in policy formation. Although regional and local administrations and civil society actors share many concerns about social policy issues, the level of real involvement of NGOs in policy formation in present-day Russia is often described as ineffective and insufficient. The underlying motivation of this paper is to identify the forms and degree of cooperation between governmental and non-governmental actors in addressing social problems and the participation of non-profit actors in shaping policy formation in Russia's regions. The focus is on the sub-national level, as regional authorities bear the main responsibility for financing and implementing welfare policies. The paper thereby addresses the following question: What are the incentives, barriers and outcomes of nonprofit participation in service delivery and policy formation?

Understanding NGO advocacy strategies in Russia

There is a broad literature on the advocacy strategies of nonprofit organizations. These approaches study how external actors, e.g. lobby groups, advocacy organizations or nonprofit networks, exert influence on the policy process. The policy process has different can be divided into five phases: (1) problem definition, (2) policy design, (3) policy adoption, (4) implementation, and (5) evaluation. External actors can exert influence in each of the five phases.

A well-known theoretical approach for studying the influence strategies of nonprofit organizations is the „advocacy coalition framework“ which was developed by Paul A. Sabatier (1988). The framework was developed to describe and explain a complicated policymaking environment which contains multiple actors and levels of government, produces decisions despite high levels of uncertainty and ambiguity, takes years to turn decisions into outcomes; and processes policy in very different ways. Some issues involve intensely politicized disputes containing many actors. Others are treated as technical and processed routinely, largely by policy specialists, out of the public spotlight.

Many of the notions of the advocacy coalition framework have find their way into our everyday language which we use to describe policy processes. This include, for instance, the notion of *policy broker* or *policy change*. Policy brokers are defined as actors who mediate between coalitions and make decisions. Policy changes are defined as changes that occur over a full policy cycle.

An *advocacy coalition* is a coalition that contains ‘people from a variety of positions (elected and agency officials, interest group leaders, researchers) who share a particular belief system’ and ‘who show a non-trivial degree of coordinated activity over time’. Coalitions learn from policy implementation. This is called *policy learning*. Learning takes place through the lens of deeply held beliefs, producing different interpretations of facts and events in different coalitions. Learning is a political process – coalitions selectively interpret information and use it to exercise power.

Existing literature stresses the role of NGOs as antagonists of the state. Recent international analysis calls attention to a more cooperative form of advocacy that may produce greater dividends (Moseley, 2011). We believe this latter framework fits the Russian realities better than the alternative conflict model for the following reasons. In the balance of this article we test this hypothesis against experience in eight Russian regions and in the work of three organizations at the national level.

The cooperative approach to advocacy advanced by Mosley

- Book “How Russia really works” by A. Ledeneva, this publication adds important insights on informal practices in Russia
- On the basis of these theories an approach will be developed that will guide the following analysis

Data collection and analysis

The paper follows a regional case study approach to generate the needed insights on the basis of a cross section of Russian regions. To ensure that the case selection embraces a sufficient degree of diversity, systematic approach for selecting the regions was used. More specifically, the selection of regions was made on the basis of these factors: (1) the

level of economic prosperity in a region; and (2) its openness in political and economic terms, including openness towards NPOs. Then all regions were sorted into high and low categories in terms of these two factors and grouped the regions into four categories: (a) regions with above-average levels of both economic prosperity and openness; (b) those with below-average levels of both; (c) those with high levels of economic prosperity but low levels of openness; and (d) those with the reverse. Finally, two regions were picked in each category taking into account an effort to achieve a meaningful degree of geographic diversity. As a result, the following eight regions were selected for the following fieldwork: Perm and Novosibirsk (strong economic development, and strong openness); Tomsk and Belgorod (strong economic development and weak regime openness); Vladimir and Irkutsk (weak economic development and strong regime openness); and Ryazan and Tambov (weak economic development, and weak regime openness). In each region, 14 interviews were conducted with NPO representatives, two interviews with government officials, and one interview with an expert on the third sector in the region. In sum, a minimum of 17 interviews were conducted in each region, resulting in a total of 136 interviews. Thus, the main question of the proposed paper – what are the incentives, barriers and outcomes of involvement of nonprofit organizations in service delivery and policy formation – will be analyzed on the basis of rich qualitative data from eight Russian regions.

Mapping social sector NGOs in Russia's regions

Among social sector NGOs in Russia's we can distinguish between five types of organizations: (1) self-help organizations, (2) service providers, (3) government-affiliated NGOs (GONGOs), (4) outsiders, and (5) policy-advocacy organizations. Not more than 10 percent of regional and local NGOs in the social sector belong to the last group.

Influence strategies of Social Sector NGOs in Russia's regions

What are the channels of influence that NGOs can use for advocacy? These are the public chamber and councils of social policy departments of the regional and local administration. More important than these official channels are personal contacts with civil servants and direct cooperation with the branches of the administration and specific state institutions.

When we look on the opportunity structures and influence strategies, our preliminary results are the following:

NGOs can exert influence on policy making, if they are represented by a strong policy entrepreneur with good relationships to local/regional administration (= in a context of weak political institutions, interpersonal ties become very important)

NGOs can assert influence on policy making, if civil servants in the local/regional administration depend on their knowledge or expertise in a given policy field/policy subsystem, or if they can convince civil servants that they have valuable information, experience, or insights that can help the civil servant be more successful in his job;

NGOs can exert influence on policy making, if their mission coincides with priorities set by the federal government or personally by the president (= opportunities structure the influence of NGOs; if Putin says that youth work is a national priority, youth NGOs are empowered, receive funding, and are able to assert influence)

Regional and local NGOs can be more effective locally if they are backed up by a national coalition that successfully surfaces their issues with national policy makers.

Conclusions

The policy process takes place behind closed doors. Social sector NGOs are actors from the outside and can thus only have limited influence on the policy process. They depend on 'windows of opportunities'

When we look at the stages of the policy process, we can conclude that NGOs do not have a chance to play a role in agenda-setting and policy formation. However, they can have an influence on policy adoption and implementation.

What are the drawbacks of this mechanism? There is a dependency relationship between the administration and nonprofits. Nonprofit influence is often ad-hoc and

depends on 'signalling from above'. The cooperation ties are not sustainable. Some nonprofits are excluded from the possibility of participating in the policy process. The policy framework advantages some NGOs and disadvantages others.

The openness of the regional political systems decide to what extent external actors can be involved. This explains the differences among the eight regions that we have been studying.

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