

Post-Soviet “Political”?
“Social” and “Political” in the Work of Russian
Socially Oriented CSOs

The role of civil society organizations (CSOs) is today a debated question in any society. Depending on the framework of the debate, a common functional distinction is to divide them into two crucial roles: promoting societal change through advocacy work and social welfare-oriented support of (vulnerable) people. The former is usually labeled as political activity, though which such organizations or groups aim at having an impact on common issues and defending people’s rights and interests. The other, social role is tightly connected to welfare service provision role.

The first of these roles is often viewed through the so-called democratization framework, according to which civil society and citizens being active through organized forms of action are seen as a necessity for democracy. Another role, in turn, is discussed within the economically oriented welfare framework, in which CSOs are usually understood as part of the non-profit voluntary third sector, which can compensate for the dysfunctionality of the state in welfare provision. Consequently, service-oriented organizations are generally recognized as core concerns of the welfare framework, while organizations engaged in advocacy are treated more frequently in the democratization framework. The related research has become somewhat bifurcated into these separate frameworks and consequently into two distinctive categories and roles of CSOs.¹

The majority of Russian CSOs seem to work with questions concerning social welfare. In the democratization framework these Russian socially oriented CSOs have been most often depicted as apolitical helpers of the Russian state, with the social assistance of their beneficiaries as their primary function and consequently lacking more political ability and impact.

Research Task and Methodology

The above-described differentiation of two roles of CSOs also became clearly articulated in my conversation with a leader of a child protection organization:

¹ Elisabeth S. Clemens. 2006. “The Constitution of Citizens: Political Theories of Nonprofit Organizations.” In Walter W. Powell and Richard Steinberg, eds. *The Nonprofit Sector: A Research Handbook*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 213.

Anna: “In the social sphere, yes. Why do they [CSOs] work especially in the social sphere? Because it’s what our society acutely needs. [...] The biggest role ... in the first place, promoting children’s rights for us [the organization in question], promoting human rights for CSOs [in general]. Because, unfortunately, today human rights are violated, frequently. It concerns children; it concerns adults. People, in principle, are illiterate, and don’t know their rights. Thus, social movements must give a possibility to people to learn about their rights, and these organizations are obliged to promote and defend their rights. So, such a pressing problem prevails, concerning human rights. But at the moment, very many organizations play, perhaps, a charity role. It concretely concerns our organization as well – to pay for day care, to buy school books, to cover tickets for kids to ride to schools. But I think that the role of civil society organizations is deeper: to influence public opinion, to shape public opinion in a certain direction, to contribute to legislation ...”

On the other hand, around the same time in 2007, a leader of a Russian war and labor veterans’ organization indicated a more political role, which seems to take place in the sphere of the so-called social questions:

“In our country, the political and socioeconomic situation has changed drastically and unforeseeably – that is, far from the better direction. Default, delays in pensions, monetization, reforms in housing and health care, new administrative-territorial division ... The Veterans’ Council has become a defender of the legal rights of the older generation. And the passing of time has given evidence: Veterans’ organizations are needed like air. During recent years, they have become a powerful and coherent force that defends the interests of all the veterans, retirees and the disabled.”

Departing from these two quotations, I have set the target for the investigation in this article: I seek to understand the role and functions of SO CSOs in contemporary Russian society. I do not assume any single or predetermined role for certain kinds of organization. Instead, I ask what their primary function is: whether the studied organizations are active in policy/advocacy work, service provision or other kinds of function. I am particularly interested in whether the socially oriented organizations carry alongside their more obvious social (service provision) role any political (advocacy) role. If so, my explicit aim is to understand how the “political” and “social” might become interconnected

in their work. Furthermore, my particular aim is to uncover what qualifies political, i.e. what can be understood as a political action in the given setting.

In addition to my general focus on SO CSOs, my investigation includes neglected Soviet-legacy voluntary organizations alongside organizations with social orientation that have been established – often through transnational connections – in the post-Soviet era. In my analysis, alongside the investigation of the societal functions of these two types, I seek to understand possible differences in their logics of action. My analysis is grounded on several my own and collective qualitative research projects.

What Counts as Political in Contemporary Russian Civil Society?

People who were engaged in the studied organizations did not usually consider their organizations as political, as strongly expressed by a leader of a Karelian women's organization:

“No, we are not a political organization; that is unequivocal. We provide help on every occasion. When it is election time, women, our members, usually participate in the work of election committees. [...] I think that we are here more for solving social problems.”

When I went deeper in trying to understand people about being political, I noticed that political was understood as party politics, which seems to me rather a narrow definition of being political (and doing politics). This persuaded me to go into the question of what qualifies as “political”.

Being political and doing politics is indeed a challenging question in the context of Russia. First of all, in the Russian language, there is only one word “*politika*,” which refers to both policy and politics, i.e. no distinction is made between doing politics and policy-making, which are obviously two different things. The Russian term refers almost exclusively to policy-making – its products, i.e. policies. Hence, a claim of not being political does not equate with having no societal impact, i.e. carrying out no political function in society. Secondly, the current legislation on CSOs forbids political activity, so it would not be wise for Russian CSOs to openly claim to be engaged in political activity. Furthermore, in the current environment with the negative connotations of the term “foreign agent” being political becomes stigmatized.

My ethnographic methods of “learning by understanding” have allowed me to go beyond the surface of the research participants’ accounts, whose self-identification did not always coincide with being political. In other words, “political” is used here as an analytical tool instead of the self-identification of actors. Obviously aiming at societal change through changing laws or influencing public opinion counts as political, as does systematic advocacy of the interests and rights of certain groups. In addition, I consider transforming personal issues into public ones through the work of CSOs as political activity, thus pointing to smaller transformations and changes at the lower levels of Russian society. As my research concerns SO CSOs, their activity connects with the concept of care. Many related questions, such as who the caregivers are, who receives care, who allocates the resources, are highly political. Moreover, my particular aim is to expose how these two dimensions, the political and social role of the studied organizations, possibly intersect. Therefore, my theoretical aim is to merge the so-called democratization and welfare frameworks to study the role of CSOs in contemporary Russia.

Another distinction that prevails in the scholarly literature concerns the location of civil society in relation to the state. Within Russian studies, the liberal design of state-society relationship has been dominant. In this model, civil society represents a critical counterweight of the state, its main function to advocate societal change and citizens’ interests against the state. From such a perspective, the predominant conclusion has been that only a marginal number of Russian CSOs function according to liberal principles. In contrast, the Russian state-society model is interpreted as statist, which has meant that Russian CSOs are seen – in addition to the lack of their political ability – as lacking in independence and co-opted by the authorities.² Such liberal vs. statist debates have left little room for analyses of more collaborative relationships or overlaps between state and civil society. In my view, the dominant liberal state-society understanding has contributed to the prevalence of the democratization framework and vice versa, which might limit our understanding of civil society and its role in contemporary Russia.³

Soviet-legacy Membership Organizations: Politics of Inherited Social Rights

² Alfred B. Evans. 2006. “Vladimir Putin’s Design for Civil Society.” In Alfred B. Evans, Laura A. Henry, and Lisa McIntosh Sundstrom, eds. *Russian Civil Society: A Critical Assessment*. New York: M.E. Sharpe.

³ Meri Kulmala. 2013. *State and Society in Small-Town Russia: A Feminist-Ethnographic Inquiry into the Boundaries of Society in the Finnish-Russian Borderland*. Vol. 2013. 14. Helsinki: Publications of the Department of Social Research.

The Soviet “voluntary” organizations have been neglected in Western scholarship on post-Soviet civil society as illegitimate due to their heavy statist Soviet legacy. My analysis, including several veterans’ and pensioners’ organizations in Karelia and Saint Petersburg and disabled people’s associations in Karelia, shows that even if those organizations usually build on the Soviet-type, hierarchical organizational structure they truly consist of people with shared identity, in the name of which they actively practice interest representation and rights defense – usually vis-à-vis the Russian state. I therefore categorize them as membership organizations that are anchored at the grassroots level, which work with a classic representative structure having clear constituencies whose rights and interests are defended through the organized form of collective action.

Much emphasis was put on defending and struggling for the rights and interest of the people an organization claimed to represent. This allows to conclude that the main function of this type of organization is interest representation and rights defense, i.e. advocacy, which does not only happen on a case-by-case basis for individual members but takes a more generalized form for larger groups – pensioners, veterans or the disabled at large. Their advocacy work usually happens “against” the state, which obviously tries to withdraw from its previous social obligations concerning the constituencies of the organizations in question.

Lobbying regional and federal level policy-makers to including their specific member category into the federal law on veterans seems to be the most burning issue and thus most visible effort by many of the studied veterans’ organizations.⁴ The success of such efforts would mean better social benefits for those categories of people. Thus, the advocacy work of the legacy organizations concern either achieving or securing certain social rights for their members. That is to say, the “political” and “social,” largely intertwined.

Interestingly enough, such advocacy of interests often happens quite systematically through political connections, regional-level parliaments and municipal councils. Many of the studied organizations actively communicated with regional-level parliamentarians and local councilors about their needs. They aimed at furthering the interests of their members thus through the representative branches of the government – by voting for their supporters or fellows at the regional and local elections to get their message to the policy-makers. “We are the electorate,” was an often-

⁴ See for details Meri Kulmala & Anna Tarasenko. 2016. “Interest Representation and Social Policy Making: Russian Veterans’ Organizations as Brokers between the State and Society.” *Europe-Asia Studies* 68: 1: 138–163.

heard statement by which people referred to the fact that the politicians had to listen the concerns channeled through the studied organizations. Many of the organizations in fact had members in the above-mentioned representative bodies. As one veteran leader in Saint Petersburg described:

“Fourteen deputies of the regional parliament are members of our organization. So, we have our own lobby.”

In addition to such a political function, these organizations also had other kinds of function better classified as service provision functions. First, they helped their members to access information about existing services, subsidies and other kinds of social support provided by state institutions that they are entitled to.

Moreover, one essential function was providing various forms of emotional support to members. The events organized to members provided the opportunity to meet people in similar life situations, which served the purpose of empowering the participating members, as stated by a leader of an association of the disabled:

“[at gatherings] our people sing, dance, and live life fully. These people are undaunted. They understand that if they gave up, it would be impossible to live.”

These events were also organized to provide the possibility for the members to get out to meet people in similar life situations, as one disabled leader described:

“We make excursions and on a regular basis, just trips to nature, because many sit at home and have no possibility to gather and talk. [...] In Finland, you easily meet a disabled person with a wheelchair, but when you walk on the streets of our country, do you see those people? No, you don't see them. Because if they live on the second, third floor. [...] They have no possibilities even to get down from their own floor. If we make trips to nature, [we take out] people with wheelchairs, from their [homes].”

In fact, the quote concerning “taking people out” also quite nicely illustrates one more political function – their effort to make issues visible in the Russian society. This function of publishing issues was, though, more typical of the second type of CSO.

In sum, the legacy organizations, categorized as membership organizations, functioned according to the classic mode of representation of interests. Interestingly, while often being allied with local and regional-level politicians, these organizations are in an oppositional position in their relations to the Russian federal government with their resistance and demands for social support for their members. Simultaneously, though, these organizations provide important social assistance and emotional support for their members. Thus, these two functions existed in parallel – political, but with a socially oriented advocacy function as the primary one, unlike in the work of the post-Soviet social organizations to which I turn next.

Post-Soviet Social Welfare Organizations: Politicizing New and Sensitive Issues

From the perspective of the welfare framework the other category of more recent SO CSOs carry an important role in contributing to service provision by filling the gaps left by the state. In the democratization framework, though, these organizations have been largely ignored due to their “apoliticality.” I address this question by focusing on the role of several post-Soviet SO CSOs, including child protection organizations (Karelia), women’s and men’s domestic violence organizations (Karelia and Saint Petersburg), pensioners’ organizations (Karelia and Saint Petersburg), an organization working for the mentally disabled (Karelia), and an association of social workers (Karelia).

Distinctive to the above-analyzed membership organizations, the second category is labeled here as social welfare organizations, with which I refer to a registered, mission-driven organization whose active participants do not belong to the group on behalf of whom the organization works and to whom its activities are addressed. Thus, these organizations are solidaristic.

They were not often openly engaged in advocacy work and interest representation in terms of (social) policy-making and societal change. Instead, as somewhat expected, their primary function seemed to be improving the well-being of their target groups by creating and proving social assistance to those people. For instance, women’s organizations carried a remarkable role in serving women suffering from domestic violence by offering helplines, consultations and shelters. The child protection organizations focused on assisting children in vulnerable situations through material help and juridical assistance.

There were also a few cases in which the studied organizations were directly engaged in lobbying for better laws: a Karelian child protection organization lobbied for child-friendlier legislation, Saint Petersburg feminist women's organizations struggling for domestic violence legislation,⁵ or, a group of involved fathers in Saint Petersburg who succeeded in changing the regulations for dads to be present at births – first in their own region then country-wide. These examples were, however, exceptional cases rather than the rule.

This, however, is not to say that those organizations did not have any political function. On the contrary, as a byproduct of their assistance-oriented activities, they engaged in work that can be considered political. First, these organizations often served as agents of change in modifying local welfare service provision. Often, the services that the organizations initiated for their target groups were later taken over by state structures, which means that they have been successful in creating new services. For instance in many places nowadays public crisis centers serve female victims of domestic violence, or as in Karelia, where a state-based social services center now serves the mentally disabled.⁶ In Saint Petersburg, HIV-positive mothers were first served by an NGO, but now are also served by public social service centers. In other words, the studied social welfare organizations often created services for a category of people earlier ignored by the official service provision.

Such modification of the existing palette of welfare services is to be considered as a political action, especially in the context of contemporary Russia, where voluntary failure – i.e. inherent limitations of the voluntary/third sector as a mechanism for meeting public needs⁷ – is still great due to scarce resources.

In addition to serving as initiators of new services – whether their own or later state-based ones – these service-oriented organizations were also political in the sense that those new identities were first created and then brought into public discourse. For instance, besides the concrete services for victims of domestic violence, women's organizations succeeded in converting this previously silent and private issue of domestic violence into a public issue. Or, as traditionally in Russia, the

⁵ E.g. Janet Johnson, Meri Kulmala & Maija Jäppinen. 2016. "Street-level Practice of Russia's Social Policymaking in Saint Petersburg: Federalism, Informal Politics, and Domestic Violence." *Journal of Social Policy* 45: 2: 287–304.

⁶ Kulmala. *State and Society in Small-town Russia*, 183-185.

⁷ Lester M. Salamon & Helmut K. Anheier. 1998. "Social Origins of Civil Society: Explaining the Nonprofit Sector Cross-nationally." *Voluntas: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations* 9: 3: 225.

mentally disabled have faced “almost an ignorant attitude of the state,” as one activist put it. This is to say that a category of mentally disabled had to be created. All in all, one of the so-called political functions of Russian CSOs is to make issues that they work with visible in Russian society.

Last but not least, many new approaches were introduced, for instance, in the field of social services. For example, more gender-sensitive and child-friendlier working practices were introduced, developed and mainstreamed in work in many public institutions thanks to the involvement of local social welfare organizations and their foreign partners. Thus, even if most of the studied organizations did not strive for legislative changes, they introduced significant changes in local working practices, which counts as one aspect of social change in this increasingly authoritarian context.

My argument, therefore, is that when looking at largely service-oriented post-Soviet social welfare organizations’ activities, it was not only about services but also about these organizations having a more political advocacy function in parallel to their service-oriented activities, which manifests itself in their efforts to construct and negotiate new identities, to bring sensitive issues to the public, and to change local welfare service provision and working practices as well as attitudes and mindsets among the larger society. In sum, their political ability largely took place in interconnection with the social assistance they provided, as a byproduct.

Interestingly, when it comes to active participants of many of the organizations of this group, there was a significant overlap between the different locally operating state structures and CSOs in terms of the people involved. Especially in the smaller communities, women working for local welfare state institutions were the most active participants in the studied social welfare organizations. Hence, this political action typically (and paradoxically!) took place in an arena that cannot be truly distinguished from the state.⁸ Sometimes it became impossible to say where the state ends and (civil) society begins, which clearly challenges the conflictual liberal state-society design.

In Conclusion: The Intersecting “Social” and “Political”

⁸ Cf. Kate Thomson. 2006. “Disability Organizations in the Regions.” In Evans, Henry, and Sundstrom, eds. *Russian Civil Society*.

Against the argument of the apolitical nature of the Russian SO CSOs, none of the organizations included in this study were purely apolitical, although they were engaged in political and social action to varying extents. Obviously, the studied social welfare organizations were likely to be service-oriented, whereas in the work of the Soviet-legacy organizations, a certain amount of interest representation was somewhat inherent. This is to say, in the work of these membership organizations advocacy was the primary function, which happened in the field of social policies to secure their members' social rights. In the work of the post-Soviet social welfare organizations, in turn, social assistance of their target groups was the primary task, which became political in many ways. The political work of both categories happened in the field of social questions.

Somewhat surprisingly, the old organizations classified as membership organizations appeared to be more openly political in their activities. Due to their large constituencies – for instance, pensioners, who tend to vote – these organizations have a potentially better ability to challenge state policies. Paradoxically, I found that those legacy organizations were more confrontational in comparison to the more recent social welfare organizations which had often arisen through transnational collaboration.

The location of these two organizational categories appeared to be quite different in relation to the state. Paradoxically, the oppositional and critical position of the legacy organizations – often depicted as organizations in the state's pocket – resembles the liberal design of the state-society relationship. The social welfare organizations in turn were often located close to and sometimes even inside state structures. Even from “within the state,” these organizations had the ability for bottom-up changes – instead of serving the interests of the state. I thus argue that the liberal-statist dualism in analyzing the prevailing state-society model in Russia is too narrow in scope.