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Lisa McIntosh Sundstrom, Foreign Funding: Foreign Assistance and NGO Development in Russia

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- ¹ In this thoroughly-researched and diligently-argued book, Lisa McIntosh Sundstrom looks at the impact of foreign civil society assistance on the development of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in Russia. Sundstrom investigates these interactions across two types of organizations: women's rights and soldiers' rights NGOs.
- ² *Foreign Funding: Foreign Assistance and NGO Development in Russia* is divided into five parts. The first section of the book introduces the relevance of the author's research to international relations theory and comparative politics, reviews the literature, and presents the hypothesis that has guided the author's field research in Russia (the field research was conducted in the late 1990s as part of the author's PhD thesis). The second chapter presents relevant stakeholders, which include foreign funders and Russian women's and soldiers' rights NGOs. Finally, the third and fourth sections of the volume present the findings of the Sundstrom's research on the "mixed success of foreign assistance across issue areas" and the influence of "political cultures, opportunities and constraints" on the impact of foreign assistance to Russian civil society organizations.
- ³ Sundstrom's study forms part of a larger body of research that has focused on the impact of foreign funding on the development of NGOs in post-authoritarian states. Contrary to authors such as what Keck and Sikkink¹ that describe a convergence on international norms of democracy and human rights, Sundstrom shows that important domestic, societal and cultural factors often hinder the uniform adoption of purported global norms. In so doing, she joins authors such as Mendelson and Glenn,² Jones-Luong and Weinthal³ and Carothers⁴ who underline the many limitations of the impact of NGOs in post-communist states. She highlights, for instance, that NGOs often only superficially adopt 'international norms' in order to get funding from abroad and only rarely, if ever, impact public policy outcomes in their home states. Specifically, for Sundstrom, foreign funding will have a perceptible political impact only when it promotes norms that are widely accepted in the receiving country. If not - that is when foreign assistance is employed in the pursuit of norms that are unfamiliar to local contexts - it will fail to spark an NGO movement, regardless of the amount of funding from abroad.
- ⁴ The second section of this volume is of most interest for those concerned with the relations between soldiers' rights NGOs and power ministries in Russia. Dating the first soldiers' rights organizations to the committee of soldiers' mothers formed in 1989 to denounce the military enrolment of university students during

the Soviet war in Afghanistan, Sundstrom reports that soldiers' rights NGOs have had a number of successes in calling for military reforms by protesting abuses of soldiers in the Russian army. They have, *inter alia*, influenced the adoption of a draft law on alternative military service and have founded their own political party, the United People's Party of Soldiers' Mothers. The author suggests that contrary to other types of NGOs, soldiers' rights NGOs have been highly popular in Russia because of deeply rooted cultural norms in Russia that consider bodily harm against soldiers as far more important than, to name one example, discrimination against women in society. As one soldiers' rights NGO women activist puts it to the author: "rape is far less important than brutality against soldiers." (p. 149).

5 Moreover, the author points out that "pacifist" soldiers' rights NGOs such as the Antimilitarist Association or the Ekaterinburg Movement Against Violence have been much less popular and successful in influencing policy when calling for the abolition of conscription or when promoting antimilitarist principles. The author explains this discrepancy in terms of deeply embedded norms in Russian society: while most Russians are highly concerned about frequent reports of physical abuse against draftees, they espouse in their majority pro-military sentiments, not pacifist or anti-military ones.

6 Sundstrom is to be commended for her wide-ranging research across Russia that forms the backbone of this study; her hypotheses and assertions are systematically supported by empirical evidence obtained from field research conducted in seven cities: Moscow, Saint-Petersburg, Ekaterinburg, Izhevsk, Vladivostok, Khabarovsk, and Novgorod. In doing so, her study does not only speak of the impact of foreign funding on NGOs but also of more general aspects of contemporary Russian society, including the vast differences between Moscow, Saint-Petersburg and the rest of the country that often go unnoticed in journalistic accounts of Russia. However, the author's findings appear to be somewhat outdated. The book was published in 2006, but most of the field research and analysis dates back from 1999. While the book does attempt to look at the consequences of the "Putin era", that attempt falls short of an adequate discussion of the restrictions imposed by Putin on foreign funding and does not provide a sufficiently elaborate discussion of the impact of these restrictions on the work of NGOs in Russia.

7 Despite these shortcomings, *Foreign Funding: Foreign Assistance and NGO Development in Russia* remains a noteworthy addition to the literature on NGO development in Russia and foreign civil society funding more generally. It is a recommendable read for both practitioners and theorists of civil society capacity building, as well as for non-specialists interested in the role and characteristics of women's and soldiers' rights NGOs in today's Russia.

Endnotes

1 Margaret Keck and Kathryn Sikkink. *Activists Beyond Borders*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998.

- 2 Sarah E. Mendelson and John K. Glenn (Eds.) *The Power and Limits of NGOs*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2002.
 - 3 Pauline Jones-Luong and Erika Weinthal, "The NGO Paradox: Democratic Goals and Non-Democratic Outcomes in Kazakhstan", *Europe-Asia Studies*, Vol. 51, # 7, 1999
 - 4 Thomas Carothers, *Aiding Democracy Abroad: The Learning Curve*, Washington Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 1999.
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