

The Journal of Power Institutions in Post-Soviet Societies

Numéro Issue 9 (2009)
NGOs and Power Ministries in Russia

Elisabeth Sieca-Kozlowski

NGOs and the Power Ministries in Russia: from Resistance to Cooperation?

Avertissement

Le contenu de ce site relève de la législation française sur la propriété intellectuelle et est la propriété exclusive de l'éditeur.

Les œuvres figurant sur ce site peuvent être consultées et reproduites sur un support papier ou numérique sous réserve qu'elles soient strictement réservées à un usage soit personnel, soit scientifique ou pédagogique excluant toute exploitation commerciale. La reproduction devra obligatoirement mentionner l'éditeur, le nom de la revue, l'auteur et la référence du document.

Toute autre reproduction est interdite sauf accord préalable de l'éditeur, en dehors des cas prévus par la législation en vigueur en France.

revues.org

Revues.org est un portail de revues en sciences humaines et sociales développé par le CLEO, Centre pour l'édition électronique ouverte (CNRS, EHESS, UP, UAPV).

Electronic reference

Elisabeth Sieca-Kozlowski, « NGOs and the Power Ministries in Russia: from Resistance to Cooperation? », *The Journal of Power Institutions in Post-Soviet Societies* [Online], Issue 9 | 2009, Online since 13 septembre 2009. URL : <http://pipss.revues.org/index2384.html>

DOI : en cours d'attribution

Éditeur : Centre d'études et de recherche sur les sociétés et les institutions post-soviétiques (CERSIPS)

<http://pipss.revues.org>

<http://www.revues.org>

Document accessible en ligne à l'adresse suivante : <http://pipss.revues.org/index2384.html>

Document généré automatiquement le 25 mars 2010.

Creative Commons License

Elisabeth Sieca-Kozlowski

NGOs and the Power Ministries in Russia: from Resistance to Cooperation?

- 1 The idea for this issue came to me after reading Brian Taylor's article "Law Enforcement and Civil Society in Russia", published in March 2006¹ and brought to our attention by Myriam Désert and Gilles Favarel during their seminar at the École de Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales in 2007. This stimulating article nuances the idea that Russian civil society is under threat by an increasingly authoritarian government.
- 2 The usual picture of post-Soviet society today is one in which NGOs are targeted by the government (by Vladimir Putin in particular), which accuses them of not serving the true interests of the population: NGOs are frequently stigmatized as the lackeys of international groups, and certain policies and provisions seem aimed at undermining their work. On the other side, the power ministries, and law enforcement agencies particularly, are viewed as instruments, if not instigators of repressive tendencies in society and also as the primary violators of human rights.
- 3 Brian Taylor's article shows that in reality, the situation is more complex. He draws attention to forms of cooperation put in place between law enforcement agencies and elements of civil society in the common aim of bringing about changes in the norms and values of the representatives of these agencies.
- 4 Three years have passed since the publication of this article. The conditions under which NGOs work have worsened: they have been and continue to be the object of various forms of attack. In April 2006 a new law regulating their work came into force. It imposed the re-registration of all Russian and international associations present in Russia and tightened administrative controls.
- 5 Rather than re-examine the NGOs studied by Brian Taylor, we chose to focus on the present situation of NGOs whose activities bring them into contact with the power ministries (via seminars, publications destined for them, or cooperation programs). We wanted to see whether the new legislation has undermined their work or on the contrary, whether they have been protected by the civil servants they are in contact with; in general, to see how cooperation has developed and how both sides view it.
- 6 The aim of this issue is to shed new light on the relations between Russian and post-soviet NGOs and what are known as the "power ministries" – the Defence and Interior Ministries, the Ministry of Justice, etc. – in areas such as justice (prisons, prisoners, judiciary reform, etc), the police (police brutality, etc.), the army (violence, veterans and post-military service care, etc.) and others.
- 7 We conducted in-depth interviews with NGO members on their work in cooperation with the power ministries, as well as one interview with an international NGO.
- 8 The following are the NGOs (in order of years of existence) whose representatives we interviewed:
 - **Moscow Centre for Prison Reform**, Moscow- The Centre was created in 1979 to promote an efficient and fair penal system. It only works in prisons for women and prisons for young girls.
 - **Union of Soldiers' Mothers' Committees**, Moscow - This non-governmental association was founded in 1989 – (Committee of Soldiers' Mothers of Russia until 1998) – to defend the rights of soldiers and their families, and to promote professionalism in the Russian army's troops.

- **Centre for Interethnic Cooperation**, Moscow - The CIC was founded in November 1997 by Ashot Airapetian and representatives of national associations in Moscow. The Centre's basic mission is the protection of national minorities; it provides national associations with organizational, informational, and technological support. The CIEC organizes seminars and conferences with local and regional representatives of police administrations in the aim of promoting ethnic tolerance in Russia.
- **Demos**, Moscow - The Demos Centre was founded in January 2004 by the Moscow Helsinki Group along with several leading human rights activists. Its mission is to "help Russian civil society resolve its most pressing social problems".
- **Agora**, Kazan - Founded in 2005, Agora is a union of seven local groups of human rights lawyers in Russia. Agora defends human rights activists, reports military and police abuse, medical negligence, and reports on human rights abuses on minors in closed children's institutions.
- **Caritas, Secours Catholique**, Paris, France. Caritas is a charitable humanitarian association and NGO that develops actions abroad in close collaboration with local Caritas organisations. These actions are usually linked to emergency situations, crises of a political or social nature, poverty and underdevelopment. Since 2001, Caritas Secours Catholique has been active in Russia in matters concerning prisons and justice for minors, one of its major areas of effort in the country.

9 Numerous subjects were raised during these interviews (types of cooperations, how they functioned, etc.). Rather than synthesize the latter, I propose to highlight a few central themes, referring the reader to the interviews themselves for further detail.

Tension between their position as “critics of the State” and their relations with the power ministries: a generational phenomenon?

10 Particularly in the case of the older associations, interviews show a clear change in point of view – from one of denunciation (the legacy of their link with dissidence), as can be seen in the opinions voiced by Liudmila Alpern of the Moscow Centre for Prison Reform – to one of constructive criticism and a strategy of cooperation, if not loyalty, in the case of the Committee of Soldiers' Mothers. Whereas for many years the Committee had defied the state and darkened the image of military service, the interview with Valentina Melnikova is evidence of the Committee's increasing loyalty with regard to power and the defence ministry (“There is no institutional conflict, there are only personal conflicts”, “when someone needs a soldier to move, or a car, they call the military authorities”; “the system accepts us”.) NGOs working on the same subject today fault her with this closeness to power.

11 The contrast with the “new generation” of NGOs can be felt in the point of view of Pavel Chikov, for example, staunch advocate of cooperation: “Putting an end to criticism cannot be a condition for an agreement”, he says (§ 30); though basically, he makes no concessions. He believes in not making unreasonable demands so that relations can be established. According to Chikov, diplomacy and flexibility without making compromises are the sign of maturity on the part of an NGO (Chikov § 34). The representative of Demos agrees with this principle: “In the end, we also have to know how to speak to representatives of law enforcement bodies: we should not tell them ‘you are violating human rights’ but instead ‘you are breaking the law’ and after that, ‘it violates human rights’” (Novikova § 18).

Relations with the administrations depend on the development of personal relations and vary according to region

- 12 Relations between associations and the power ministries can be engaged at all levels, but personal relations are the most valuable (Alpern, Melnikova, Chikov § 6, Airapetian etc.). Differences according to region also exist: what is possible in one region may not be in another (Novikova § 6). The farther one is from the centre, the more autonomy one has (Coqblin § 26). Nonetheless, knowing someone in the hierarchy and being thought of as a serious person is a key to opening doors. It is often difficult to reach the top of the hierarchy (several examples testify to this in the case of the Interior Ministry, cf. Novikova, Chikov, Airapetian), whereas the lower echelons have somewhat more autonomy and contact is easier (Chikov § 46). Such autonomy is however relative, given that when one needs a superior's help to speed up a project, that person is nowhere to be found. (Novikova § 32). In some regions, a lot depends on the regional authority rather than on the de-concentrated federal administration, but some of those interviewed said that it is becoming more and more difficult every year to work with the authorities (Melnikova § 27); Airapetian § 33). The mobility of local actors makes cooperation difficult: i.e. when a new prison director arrives at his post, the NGO is obliged to rebuild relations with the new appointee and once more explain the need for the action that has been put in place (Alpern: Coqblin).

The 2006 law has weakened NGOs in general ...

- 13 Most of the associations contacted had been victims of insidious attacks: attempts at evicting them from their premises (Alpern), systematic inspections, repeated harassment and threats (Chikov § 41). After the law on NGOs was adopted, some NGO members were prevented from reaching the premises where their project was established (Coqblin § 47): a one-month phase of suspicion followed. In most cases, relations in the hierarchy were of no help, whether they were in the upper echelons or not (meaning close to the President for Alpern; to other levels of the hierarchy for Chikov). On the whole, there was more difficulty in the regions for the regional partners of these associations, whose representatives seem rather pessimistic, especially the young generations (Alpern). Among the NGOs met, only the Committee of Soldiers' Mothers claims not to have been affected by the scandal of the British Embassy and the law on NGOs (Melnikova § 35):

“To my mind, the turning point was in 2005 with the scandal of the British Embassy. At the time, the Committee of Soldiers' Mothers wasn't mentioned once: not one journalist associated us with the affair. That means they're afraid of us and have understood that if they touch us, it won't do them any good. For me, that was a turning point, I listened carefully to the list of organisations: will they mention us or not? They didn't, and I understood that that was it. They had accepted us, they considered us a necessary social structure”. (Melnikova §35-36)²

... but they are aware of their future impact

- 14 Everyone we interviewed felt they had had a real influence on social change, though they realized that the impact of the projects they had set up would not be felt on the short term (Novikova § 16). The majority agree that they are working for the future (Novikova; Alpern § 57), thus for the long term. Some recognize their words or extracts from their publications in official speeches (Novikova; Alpern § 52), whereas a few years ago, certain ideas put forth in these publications were considered undesirable. Despite this change for the better, there remains the feeling that they are a “foreign” element, or at least that they are perceived as such in Russian society (Alpern § 57).
- 15 Some NGOs can name with precision the progress they feel they have been responsible for, thanks to hard work and perseverance. Such progress includes “a change in the way of

thinking” (Alpern), “a change in psychology and in relations with people” (Melnikova § 21), the scrapping of a bill: “we [*the committees and the Prokuratura*] stopped the law on the military police” (Melnikova § 8), the withdrawal of a measure (“We believe that the President’s decision to exclude registration and control of NGOs from the Russian Register Service and its abolition on October 1, 2008³ was a result of the active work of a number of Russian human rights groups, including Agora, in 2006-2008”) (Chikov § 58) and finally, the ousting of a minister (“We also think that we had a similar impact on the dismissal of the Defence Minister Sergey Ivanov in 2007”) (Chikov § 58). Progress also includes the organisation of civil control over the army (“What is called today “civil control”, was already there (beginning in 1989) when the organisation of soldiers’ mothers, working together with the military, visited the troops, not only when there had been an incident, but conducted inspections, met with soldiers and discussed with the command. This kind of organisation, which exists in no other army in any country, we had put in place during the soviet era”) (Melnikova § 22).

The importance of international support and exchange

- 16 International exchanges (prizes, awards, funding) remain an essential factor of recognition inside the country: “No one recognizes an organisation so long as it isn’t recognized abroad” (Melnikova § 45); for the associations themselves, international support means recognition of their ability to cooperate with authorities who aren’t always cooperative.
- 17 As for exchanges, they create impetus for change (Coqblin § 40) and allow NGO actors to benefit from experience abroad (Alpern, Coqblin). All the NGOs whose representatives we met with work thanks to foreign funding; for some, this funding has a tendency to decrease over time, and for others it is maintained (Chikov § 3). The fact of receiving foreign funding can often work against its beneficiaries: during the presidential election, the authorities’ demonizing of the UK and the US resulted in a loss of personal support to NGOs that had been receiving UK and US funding for many years. Once the elections were over, some returned, others did not (Airapetian § 16).

The point of view of the power ministries: NGOs are necessary, provided they abide by strict rules

- 18 Although we were unable to question representatives of the power ministries engaged in cooperations with NGOs, the testimonies of NGO representatives themselves in regard to their collaborators and the kinds of projects undertaken provide some information on what administrations have to gain from joint actions.
- 19 First of all, the many forms of cooperation described in these interviews belie the common notion that the ministries categorically refuse to cooperate with outside organisations. Alongside a discourse that presents NGOs as a threat, a Trojan horse the administration wants to rid itself of, interviews prove that for the members of the administrations concerned, participation in local and international cooperation programs can be profitable – either symbolically (trips abroad) or professionally (intellectual interest, possibilities of promotion).
- 20 Both on top of the ladder and on the lower levels, members of the various administrations (mostly regional) express their interest in the work of these NGOs (Novikova § 16). However, it is interesting to note that entire sections of these administrations are unaware of the very existence of their work, despite the fact that it is directly connected with their own sphere of activity. We can therefore say that certain real “niches” of cooperation do exist, but because information is not spread, these collaborations remain unknown to the rest of the administration concerned. I observed this last October during an interview with the Deputy President of the Council of Russian Veterans of the Interior Ministry⁴, who was totally unaware of the existence of the work of the Demos Association that concerned veterans of his own ministry⁵, whereas Asmik Novikova told us in her interview that the Moscow Police Academy

- knew of Demos' work and envisaged a collaboration with her association (Novikova § 16). The spread of information thus remains a central issue in the diffusion of knowledge and practices.
- 21 An article recently published in the journal of the Interior Ministry, *Professional*⁶, confirms the growing interest of law enforcement agencies in cooperation with NGOs. The author, Vladimir Chugunov, a high-ranking official of the Interior Ministry, describes forms of cooperation put in place by NGOs and the Moscow OVD (*Otdel vnutrennikh del / Local section of internal affairs*) and the efforts made on both sides to dislodge deeply rooted stereotypes. For defenders of human rights, it was necessary to combat the notion of the police as a violent organisation and therefore the enemy of human rights; and for the police, from village policeman to high-ranking officers, to rid them of the idea that the action of human rights advocates is of a provocative and destructive nature (p.15).
- 22 According to Chugunov, the Moscow OVD cooperates with over 9 000 NGOs (there are 17 500 NGOs in Moscow). The need for such partnerships stemmed from the increase in complaints (mainly about the illegal behaviour of police collaborators) on the telephone line put at the public's disposal in the GUVD (*Glavnoe upravlenie vnutrennikh del / Main Directorate of Interior Affairs*) – in just a few years, the number of calls had risen from 15-20 over a 24-hour period to over 60.
- 23 Among the NGO partners of the Moscow OVD are the Moscow Helsinki Group, a section of the International Commission of Jurists, the “Center for Independent Judicial Expertise”, “Social Partnerships”, the “Committee for Citizens' Rights”, the “For Human Rights” movement, and “Freedom of Will”⁷.
- 24 In particular, the author of the article feels that it is thanks to the practice of holding preliminary discussions with the representatives of social movements that a conflict was avoided during the “Dissenters March” of June 11, 2008 and that no breach of law and order occurred. However, this is probably an exception, most dissenters marches having ended in police violence and arrests. It is likely that this is more wishful thinking on the part of the author than a description of reality.
- 25 In the author's opinion, the most efficient tool for calling attention to the violations of citizens' rights by the police would be common patrolling by organisations for the defence of human rights and the inspection of personnel (ILS GUVD). Since January 2005, such joint patrols have become systematic and obligatory. The organisations “*Svoboda voli*” and the “*Komitet za grazhdasnie prava*”⁸ have participated in over one hundred patrols aimed at “strengthening the professional culture of police collaborators and conforming to a respectful mode of discourse with citizens in regard to their rights and liberties.”
- 26 The rapprochement between NGOs and the police and the improvement in the capacity of both to hear what the other is saying are also credited with the inquiry into the illegal demand on the part of two OVD administrators to obtain the list of pupils of Georgian origin from two headmasters of schools, following a complaint filed in October 2006⁹, as well as the downgrading of two OVD administrators, one from the Verdnarskii Prospekt quarter and the other from the Tanganskaya quarter OVD, which issued the illegal demand.
- 27 This testimony concerning NGO/Interior Ministry cooperation is especially valuable, not only for its originality, but also for being the only one, to our knowledge, ever published in an Interior Ministry journal.

NGOs at the service of a civil society in conformity with the wishes of power: institutionalized forms of cooperation

- 28 Attempts on the part of the state to put in place institutionalized forms of cooperation with the power ministries – with the creation of social platforms, the Public Chamber (*Obshchestvennaia Palata*), the reactivation of pro-government associations functioning as

“conveyors” between the power ministries and society (GONGOs¹⁰ such as the Council of Parents of Servicemen) were discussed at length by our interviewees.

29 NGOs have little appreciation of GONGOs, which they disregard (Melnikova § 35) and consider “a rather archaic form of the system. [*They are*] a characteristic phenomenon of the Soviet system” (Alpern § 39). The NGOs that tried unsuccessfully to obtain funding from the Public Chamber seem the most wound up against the latter institution and want nothing more to do with it (Chikov § 50; Airapetian § 23). The competence of its members and its management of funds are questioned. The information required of NGOs for participation in bids for tender are deemed excessive.

30 Other more nuanced reports “sense that something is happening there”, though without being able to assess what it is: “there was a time when it was shameful to go [*to the Public Chamber*] because it was seen as a collaboration. It’s different now” (Alpern § 42). The fear of participating in tenders – even when the decision to do so has already been made – lest the government make use of such a partnership to increase its control, financial in particular – is brought up (Alpern § 50). But cooperation with the Public Chamber can also turn out to be fruitful and openly recognized as such, to the extent of saying: “Mutually advantageous cooperation has to be built up with them; we have to stop accusing them of using us, because in fact we use each other!” (Novikova § 18).

31 We might sum up the preceding with these observations:

- 1. NGOs have proved tenacious, have succeeded in holding their ground and pursuing their activity despite ongoing attacks. Personal relationships maintained over time have made possible the kind of work many a western country might envy. Obviously, considering the toughening of overall legislation in regard to NGOs, their access to the power ministries hardly reflects state policy. However, our interviews and the article in *Professional* show that certain administrations are beginning to ask for the type of cooperations explored in this issue.
- 2. This cooperation from the bottom up is positive, but nonetheless does not give leave for optimism: NGOs’ constant problems with the police (cf. Memorial, for the most recent example) and renewed attacks on the part of power (cf. the recent accusation by the Justice Ministry that NGOs are used for the purpose of money laundering)¹¹. The annual reports of the Observatory of Defenders of Human Rights contain numerous examples of aggressive tactics aimed at independent NGOs.
- 3. The borderline is becoming less marked between organisations which are pro-government and those that are not. One hypothesis might be that this is because NGOs today can no longer be outspokenly critical of power and that in the end, their day-to-day actions tend more and more to resemble those of the GONGOs, since NGOs and individuals who persist in voicing criticism find themselves in serious trouble (cf. Carine Clément and Mikhail Beketov, for example, or Stanislav Markelov – to whom we pay tribute in this issue – and so many others).
- 4. During the Soviet era there were no independent associations, and the only independent reports concerning the power ministries came from dissidents, victims of the former’s strategies. After the fall of the USSR, two concomitant changes occurred: the power administrations opened onto society, claiming “civil control” of the army, for example, (a theme very popular at the end of the 1980s), and many independent associations wishing to work in cooperation with the power ministries were created. Today, 20 years after *Perestroika*, cooperations exist, but the possibility for an NGO to be openly critical of the government does not exist, nor are there any political relays that could voice their proposals (to the Duma, for example). This is the main difference between the 1990s, when the liberal parties could still lobby for the benefit of certain NGOs. Note that during our interviews, none of the interviewees mentioned the Duma. The possibility for an NGO to influence the legislative process and political life is now

quasi zero. Alone, with no public space and no political relays or well developed civil society, NGOs have little power.

Book reviews

- 32 I now invite you to read this issue's book reviews, some of which concern work carried out by the NGOs mentioned here and also by others.

Tribute to Stanislav Markelov

- 33 As a tribute to Stanislav Markelov, assassinated in Moscow on January 20, 2009, we are publishing the French and English translations of his interview with Aude Merlin on the subject of military justice in Russia. The interview was held in Moscow on June 3, 2008 and was published in our previous issue (# 8) in Russian.

Our thanks

- 34 Our thanks in particular to the volunteer editors who worked on this issue: Dave Westerberg, Victoria Clement, Samuel Andrew Robertshaw, Suzanne Gentz and Kevin Roberts, as well as the translators: Asya Willerval (NGO interview questionnaire into Russian), Marie N. Page (interview with S. Markelov into French), Zoé Andreyev (interview with S. Markelov into English) with Yohanan Petrovsky-Shtern who edited the interview in English, and the members of the editorial board for their constructive remarks and aid in putting together this issue.

Notes

- 1 Brian Taylor, "Law Enforcement and Civil Society in Russia", *Europe-Asia Studies*, Vol. 58, # 2, March 2006, pp. 193-213.
- 2 Valentina Melnikova's remarks are rather surprising, because in 2006, the Mothers of Soldiers were attempting to group together a party when they received a summons to appear before a court on behalf of Gosregistratsiia, which demanded the cessation of the association's activity. In the end, the affair was suspended.
- 3 The Russian Register Service of NGOs was suppressed, registration functions being given over to the Ministry of Justice, as had previously been the case.
- 4 Interview with Igor Astapkin, vice-deputy director of the Council of Russian Veterans of the Interior Ministry, October 17, 2008, in Moscow.
- 5 On this subject, see also the interview of T. Lokshina, former president of Demos, in our Issue 6/7 devoted to the social and political role of Russian veterans, <http://www.pipss.org/index772.html>.
- 6 General of Police Vladimir Chugunov, Deputy Director of the Main Directorate of Interior Affairs (GUVVD) in Moscow, "Vzaimodeistvie organov vnutrennikh del s pravozashchitnymi organizatsiiami", *Professional*, # 1, 2008, pp. 14-16.
- 7 *Moskovskaia Khelsinskaia Grupa; Otdelenie Mezhdunarodnoi Komissii Iuristov*"; "Nezavisimyi ekspertno-pravovoi tsentr"; *Sotsial'noe partnerstvo*; *Komitet za grazhdanskii prava*; *Dvizhenie "Za prava cheloveka"*; "Svoboda Voli".
- 8 <http://zagr.org/>.
- 9 Cf. report of the FIDH and *Grazhdanskoe Sodeistvie* (Civic Aid), "Migrants in Russia. Vulnerable populations, first victims of internal and external political crises", April 2007, # 472, p.26 and annexes X,Y,Z.
- 10 GONGOs often sit at Public Chambers.
- 11 The Russian Interior Ministry recently claimed that non-governmental organisations in Russia "are used for money laundering", *Interfax*, 19 January 2009.

References

Electronic reference

Elisabeth Sieca-Kozłowski, « NGOs and the Power Ministries in Russia: from Resistance to Cooperation? », *The Journal of Power Institutions in Post-Soviet Societies* [Online], Issue 9 | 2009, Online since 13 septembre 2009. URL : <http://pipss.revues.org/index2384.html>

Elisabeth Sieca-Kozłowski
Chief Editor and 9 Issue Editor

Copyright

Creative Commons License

This text is under a Creative Commons license : Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 2.0 Generic

Licence portant sur le document : Creative Commons License