

Russia-Ukraine War: Impact on Russian Civil Society

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Email: Singhsona.jnu@gmail.com**Articleinfo****Received:** 15 November 2022**Accepted:** 31 December 2022**Keywords:** Civil society, NGOs, women's movement.**How to cite this article:** Sona Singh.(2022). Russia-Ukraine War: Impact on Russian Civil Society, International Journal of Politics and Media, 1(2), 27-30 Retrieved from <https://ijpmonline.com/index.php/ojs/article/view/26>**Abstract**

On February 24 this year, Russia launched its “special military operations” against Ukraine and that set-in motion a chain of events which have had immense repercussions on all forms of Russian life. According to President Putin, this operation on Ukraine was necessary in order to “denazify” and “demilitarise” Ukraine. Many Russian experts believed that the operation was long overdue and the Russian side had been preparing for it, especially in the wake of the large Russian military presence on its border areas with Ukraine from 2021 onwards. In this article, I have argued how the Russian civil society, a fragile space struggling to reclaim its place in the country in the aftermath of the Foreign Agents Law in 2012, is impacted by the Russia- Ukraine war and how it conducts itself now will decide the future of civil society space in Russia.

1. Background to the Russia-Ukraine conflict

The first armed conflict in Ukraine began in 2013 when President Viktor Yanukovich decided to reject the proposal for greater integration with the European Union, thereby creating faultlines in the country between the supporters of Russia and the West. Immediately afterwards, protests began in the eastern and southern parts of Ukraine (which were more supportive of Russia) against Yanukovich and was met by violent crackdown from the state. Gradually, as political crisis engulfed the country, creating a rift between the pro-EU and pro-Russian demography, President Yanukovich had to flee Ukraine in February 2014. In March that year, Russia annexed the Crimean Peninsula citing the reason that it was defending its access to the Black Sea port. According to President Vladimir Putin, this action was needed to protect the rights of Russian citizens and Russian speakers in Crimea and southeast Ukraine. The US and Europe imposed many rounds of tough economic sanctions and also isolated Russia diplomatically.

History was repeated in 2022 when Russian forces invaded Ukraine again after slowly building a military presence along its borders since 2021. The reason cited for this invasion was to deter the eastwards expansion of NATO. Now, nearly eight months have passed and the war rages on unabated. The stakes are high and how the conflict will evolve on the ground still remains unclear. In this article, I have examined the impact of the Russia-Ukraine war on the civil society space in the Russian Federation, especially among NGOs working in the domain of women's rights and issues like rape, trafficking, domestic violence, gender-

based violence, etc. Such NGOs were already in a fragile space in Russia, especially after the Foreign Agents Law 2012 and owing to Russia's decriminalisation of domestic violence in 2017. Many of these NGOs largely relied on funds from abroad since the Russian population is not big on giving donations (Sundstrom 2006), but this changed the shape of the civil society space in Russia after the Foreign Agent Law was introduced in 2012. In wake of the recent special military operations in Ukraine and the sanctions imposed on Russia, these NGOs faced a double blow and are exploring options to survive in these unprecedented times.

2. Civil Society in Imperial Russia

Civil society or *Grazhdanskoe Obshchestvo* is a type of social space different from the family, the economic sphere, and the state. According to Larry Diamond, it belongs to “the realm of organised social life that is voluntary, self-generating, at least partially self-supporting, autonomous from the state, and bound by legal order or set of shared rules,” (Diamond 1999). For Diamond, what made civil society distinct from the society in general was that it “involves citizens acting collectively in a public sphere.” According to scholars like Fukuyama, its purpose is to “serve to balance the power of the state and to protect individuals from the state's power (Fukuyama 1999). As a concept, civil society gained prominence in the USSR during the 1980s, which was a time when the Soviet state was near its breakup and this impacted developments in the civil society in post-Soviet states.

In the context of the Russian Federation, the emphasis on the development of civil society gained prominence from

all quarters during the 90s because it was considered to be important for the development of a healthy democracy and many believed that a civil society space was imperative for the development of a nascent democracy taking shape. The idea of a strong civil society movement being important for the existence of a robust democracy had been made popular by Robert Putnam, a political scientist, in his early studies of civic involvement in Italy. He argued that as compared to the United States, Italy had a more robust and effective government with greater level of citizen satisfaction, owing to “a dense network of local associations, by active engagement in community affairs, by egalitarian patterns of politics, trust, law abidingness” and had more effective governments with a greater level of citizen satisfaction as compared to regions that had “less citizen involvement in the civic associations” (Putnam 1994).

To prove his point, Putnam invoked Alexis de Tocqueville (2002), a political philosopher who had emphasised the importance of associations for democratic governance in the 19th century. Tocqueville was a Frenchman who had travelled to America after the French Revolution and had great respect for the political system of America. He argued that the presence of voluntary associations and local institutions in America were a good way to solve the problems of the community and provide services in the country. He thus advocated that strong local institutions were necessary for a society to function, with the active involvement of its citizens.

Scholars writing on civil society in Russia argue that it was not a new concept there. In fact, scholars like Conroy, who define civil society as “a set of organisations and networks of cooperation created primarily by the initiative of citizens and drew at least in part on resources that were not granted by the state”, and argue that although small, but the civil society in Imperial Russia before the revolution was quite active. Conroy wrote that during the late 18th century, civil society organisations were in the form of associations, but from the late eighteenth century onwards they started multiplying, owing to events like the emancipation of serfs; tolerance by the central (and sometimes local) governments; the government’s need for financial and administrative assistance; increased prosperity, education, and self-awareness on the part of the populace; and more convenient transportation and communication (Conroy 2016).

Membership to these associations were open for citizens from all spheres and could be initiated without any push from the government. These civic establishments were supposed to register themselves in order to be able to operate legally and private charitable organisations, acted as the “cradle of civil society” as they added more funds to the corpus as compared to the money donated by central and local governments (Lindenmeyr 1996).

Apart from charity groups, associations focused on art, theatre and music flourished from the late nineteenth century onwards, which led to the advancement of the cause of civil society as they originated and operated independently from the government and, in some cases, educated the public and also provided them jobs. This nascent civil society was strengthened by factors like private property; a growing economy; a government that,

although authoritarian, abided by a codified system of rules; and a fairly responsive and honest judicial system. Although the Tsarist state was not democratic in principle, it allowed space for many independent initiatives by citizens, and in many cases even encouraged nonstate organizations as a means of gaining assistance in serving national interests. Therefore, it can be stated that during the last decades of Tsarist Russia, the efforts of a wide variety of people had generated the vibrant associational activity that indicated the emergence of a nascent civil society (Conroy 2016).

3. Civil Society in USSR

With the eclipse of the Tsarist regime, and during the early years of the USSR, as the party’s control of social organisations intensified from the early 1920s through the 1930s independent social groups started waning. In his study on civil society developments in the USSR, Alfred B Evans Jr points out that owing to the rigid mechanisms of control exercised by the Soviet state, there were no independent social organisations after the revolution. The Soviet period between 1917 to the mid-1980s, has been dubbed to be a time when civil society in Russia was noteworthy for its “nationalisation of civil society institutions”. As a result, popular activity that had proliferated in the form of arts, cultural and scientific avant-garde, along with lesser-known local movements, peasants’ and proletarian organisations during the 1920s gave way to a period of repression and political regimentation in the 1930s, which was a result of the government’s decision to forcibly collectivise agriculture and go for rapid industrialisation, which required civil society organisations that were “state-oriented” with a view to drive the foundation of socialism (Konovalova 2020).

The period between 1950 - 60, witnessed the growth of less politicised citizens’ organisations in the backdrop of Khrushchev’s denunciation of Stalin. However, during Brezhnev’s years, associations like groups for war veterans, professional designers and those involving child welfare were quite active. Gradually, a dissident movement developed in the country during the 60s which started developing countless means to resist the state – methods that involved writing, publishing artistic or journalistic critiques of the regime, creating informal circles and discussion groups, and making statements on political and human rights issues.

From 1965 onwards, organised dissident movement developed in Russia, where intellectuals, mainly writers and scientists, protested against that punishment and asserted their right of freedom of expression. By 1967, there had developed an organised movement of dissenters in the country, who were constantly raising issues of human rights and acting independently of the state by gathering signatures on petitions and disseminating multiple copies of samizdat writings. Samizdat was a form of grassroots dissident activity prevalent across the Eastern Bloc countries, where individuals reproduced censored and underground makeshift publications, often by hand, which were then circulated from reader to reader. This manual reproduction of documents was a widespread practice to evade official Soviet censorship, because accessing typewriters and printing devices required official registration and permission.

4. Civil Society in post-Soviet Russia

When Gorbachev called for the restructuring (perestroika) of all institutions in the Soviet system he enabled the limited democratisation of the system by the creation of “informal” groups, which were founded by the initiative of citizens. It was through these groups that he had expected to gather public support for his reforms and made possible the creation of civil society or *grazhdanskoe Obshchestvo* in the political discourse in Russia. Evans, an academic scholar has noted that irrespective of their orientation, whether they had any political objectives or were involved in leisure activities, informal groups were a new phenomenon as they were social organisations that were not directed by the Communist Party but pursued activities chosen by their members (Alfred B Evans 2016).

From the late 1980s onwards, many active civil society groups started to emerge in the form of human rights groups, environmental movement, among others. In 1988, according to an estimate by newspaper Pravda, there were about 30,000 such informal groups in the country. This was made possible by the adoption of a law on public associations in the late Soviet period, and supported by subsequent Russian Federation laws regulating public and charitable activity, which opened the door to registration for civil society organisations (CSOs).

The funding for these organisations was made available by the Western countries and their project to initiate democracy building exercise in the CIS states after the fall of the Berlin Wall. Russia received nearly \$860 million in democracy assistance from the United States and nearly €800 million from the European Union, between the years 1990 – 2002. Out of these funds, nearly 10 percent of the money went to funding NGOs (Sundstrom 2006).

Thus, as money became available for funding a nascent civil society, a variety of local organisations emerged in Russia, catering to the demands of soldier’s mothers’ groups to groups working in the space of environment protection. Women’s organisations received funding from foreign donors and as a result, the Russian women’s movement witnessed an increase in crisis centres that were established to help women dealing with issues like domestic violence, rape and later, trafficking.

5. Women’s activism and NGOs in post-Soviet Russia

The dissolution of the USSR created economic and social divisions within the country that was responsible for the rise of women’s activism in Russia (Sperling 2004), (Hemment 2004) and (Johnson 2009). For example, it was observed that the market reforms undertaken in the 90s, while they affected everyone, hurt women more. As a result, the number of women losing their jobs and state support was disproportionately more as compared to men. In this period, countless women lost their work, lost access to social security that was a distinctive feature of the communist system. Since inflation was high and cost of living rose high, women responded to these challenges by resorting to activism (Hemment 2004).

During the initial period, the NGOs that emerged were involved with issues like rape, gender-based violence, sexualised violence, trafficking and others topics. Since many of these beginner activists were influenced by the

West, their style of working was impacted by them which was reflected in the development of a crisis centre model across the country. However, the difference between the crisis centre model in the West and in Russia was that while in the West, it was connected to the women’s movements of the 1970s and later was linked to the human rights movement during the 90s, the main task of the crisis centres in Russia was to spread information about women’s rights. Gradually, over two hundred women’s crisis centres were established across Russia, advocating causes like domestic and sexualised violence.

These crisis centres were focused on providing aid and information to women suffering from problems like domestic violence, rape and trafficking. For example, the Angel Coalition ran hotlines providing information to those planning to travel abroad for work and ran many information campaigns to raise awareness. NGOs like St Petersburg Crisis Centre for Women, ANNA, Syostri, Safehouse Foundation, Alternative, are still active and work on issues like domestic abuse, sexualised violence and trafficking, to name a few.

6. Foreign Agents Law

The efforts to regulate the NGO sector began from the year 2006 onwards when a law was passed that made it necessary for NGOs to register themselves, for which, they had to undergo a series of time-consuming procedures, like filling up forms on funding and explaining the details. While this was routine government paperwork, some NGOs complained that it was done to limit their sphere of influence. Over time, the concept of foreign funding from the western countries began to be criticised. These attempts to exercise change over the NGO community did not mean that the anti-trafficking activities ceased, although some organisations witnessed reduced funding and spoke about the unnecessary time spent on paperwork.

When Putin was re-elected as president in 2012 for a second term, there were widescale protests in Russia, which caused tensions between the political leadership and civil society. With the aim of minimising foreign interference in the country, the government came up with a provision that made it compulsory for groups to register with the Justice Ministry as “Foreign Agents” if they received even a minimal amount of funding from any foreign sources, governmental or private, and engaged in “political activity.” The definition of political activity under the law was so broad that it effectively extended to all aspects of advocacy and human rights work. Initially, the law required all nongovernmental organisations that met the criteria to register with the ministry and to identify themselves as “Foreign Agents” in all their public materials, with legal consequences for failure to comply (Human Rights Watch 2018).

Immediately afterwards, Russia’s human rights groups boycotted the law, calling it unjust and slanderous. In 2013, Russia’s then-federal ombudsman, Vladimir Lukin, challenged the law in Russia’s Constitutional Court, but the law was upheld, and the court ruled that there were no legal or constitutional grounds for contending that the term “Foreign Agent” had negative connotations from the Soviet era and that, therefore, its use was “not intended to persecute or discredit” organisations. The court also found that the “Foreign Agent” designation was in line with the public

interest and the interest of state sovereignty. As a result of these developments, many NGOs that had been the most visible agencies dealing with anti-trafficking work in Russia, running hotlines, providing safehouses and conducting a variety of awareness campaigns against trafficking, while also organising seminars and conferences, along with providing training to law enforcement agencies and giving assistance to the victims of trafficking, found their activities limited, and NGOs like the Angel Coalition shut down.

7. Ukraine War and its impact on NGOs

Drawing a link between the Foreign Agents Law and the closing down of NGOs in Russia, Lisa Sundstrom has argued that the dependence on foreign funding and the absence of a strategy on how to raise funds within the country was an important reason why many NGOs stopped working overnight after the Foreign Agents' Law. It has been argued that it was owing to the dependence on foreign funding that an organisation like the Angel Coalition had to shut down. They had not devised a method to raise money for their work organically and were totally dependent on foreign-based agencies and institutions for funds. Those NGOs have been working on women's rights had devised a method whereby they raised money domestically within Russia, sought grants from the government or from abroad, and did this while trying to avert the 'Foreign Agent' tag.

In the wake of the Ukraine War and the sanctions on Russian banks, Russian NGOs are having problems in receiving grants from their sponsors from abroad, especially after countries declared that it was a crime to send money to Russia. While many young people now donate to NGOs which work on causes that are close to their heart, an NGO cannot rely solely on individual donors since their contributions cannot match the grant money received from foreign donors.

8. Future of Civil Society in Russia

Therefore, in light of the given situation, the way forward for the civil society appears tough and how it fares will only become clear with time. An organisation needs funds to function and salaries have to be paid. While the Foreign Agents Law created a tough situation for NGOs in Russia, those which were committed to their cause did manage to find ways to survive, but the situation with Ukraine will actually test how they fare. One thing is clear that while NGOs are now looking to domestic donors, their situation is dire.

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