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Adapting to Survive or Thrive: Civil Society, the Third Sector and Social Movements in 'Post-Soviet' Spaces: An Introduction to the Special Section

Introduction

The dissolution of the Soviet Union was heralded at the time as a victory for freedom of thought, expression, enterprise, and democracy. It was also opportunity to implement economic and political changes that would create long lasting vibrant and democratic societies across the 'post-soviet' space (Fukuyama, 1993). Moreover, it was hoped that the mass participation events at the heart of the dissolution of the Soviet Union would lead to the development of a vibrant civil space that would act as bulwark against authoritarian backsliding. Unfortunately, such broad-brushed assumptions did not account for the nuances in which former Soviet Union states gained their independence (Kamerade et al., 2016), and how these nuances shaped their subsequent social, political, and economic development. Instead, the 'post-soviet' space continues to be treated rather homogeneously. This special section in Voluntary Sector Review challenges this by inviting and selecting papers aimed to explores the contextualised dynamics of civil society in 'post-soviet' spaces. In so doing, offers a different lens on what constitutes 'civil society' beyond that found in established democracies.

In many 'post-soviet' states, including some that chose to join the EU, civil society and its actors have faced an increasingly hostile operating environment and shrinking space for their activities (Toepler et al., 2020). Regulatory changes and/or intimidation aimed at curtailing its activity, especially the ability to challenge the state, have become more commonplace. The Russian Federation seemed to be driving the 'policy innovations' that underlie these approaches to civil society and it actors (see for example, the 2006 NGO law (Crotty et al., 2014; Ljubownikow & Crotty, 2014) or the law on foreign agents (Moser & Skripchenko, 2018; Tysiachniouk et al., 2018)). Such increasingly hostile or shrinking operating environments (Toepler et al., 2020) have made it harder for civil society and its actors to respond to needs arising from national crises, hold governments to account and/or bridge the gap between the individual and the state (see for example Crotty et al., 2014; Szalai & Svensson, 2018). As a result, civil society in the 'post-soviet' space is often deemed as being 'weak' and/or ineffective (Foa & Ekiert, 2017; Howard, 2002).

Yet, research focusing on specific contexts within the 'post-soviet' space also illustrates a much more nuanced insights and experiences of civil society actors in the former Soviet Union states (Astapova et al., 2022; Beichelt, 2004; Krasynska & Martin, 2017; Lenzi, 2002; Martus, 2023; Osborne & Kaposvari, 1997; Pickvance, 1998). This has broadened our understanding of civil society generally, illustrating the range of tactics actors might use to engage in such a hostile context (Blinnikov &

Lindsey, 2010; Channell-Justice, 2022; Fröhlich & Skokova, 2020; Ljubownikow & Crotty, 2022; Moser & Skripchenko, 2018; Stepanenko, 2006; Tysiachniouk et al., 2018), how such actors engage to influence policy in a restrictive context (Kubicek, 1996; Kuti, 2004; Ljubownikow & Crotty, 2016; Pape & Skokova, 2022; Toepler & Fröhlich, 2020), or the importance informality plays in the engagement in voluntary and civic activity within 'post-soviet' contexts (Channell-Justice, 2022; Gatskova & Gatskov, 2016; Krasynska & Martin, 2017; Orr, 2008). Furthermore, it has highlighted the pragmatic and adaptable nature of civil society and its actors in the face of a shrinking civil society space – something civil society actors in established democracies have also begun to experience. Thus, this collective literature on civil society in the 'post-soviet' space has challenged dominant conceptualisations of civil society and social movements more broadly (see, for example, Gagyi, 2015; Fagan, 2005; Mishler & Rose, 1997); not least as it illustrates a decoupling of 'service provision' and holding elites to account. Groups in such hostile environments are seen to engage with constituents directly to provide a service or function, rather than on 'their behalf' to change the policy that shapes that function. This challenges the more tradition notion of civil society and actors therein acting as a bridge between the individual and the state. So, in this special section, we further explore the development of civil society, social movements and their agents within the 'post-soviet' space, and the contribution of such studies make to the wider theoretical construct of 'civil society'. Thus, we bring together 4 papers that provide interesting and context specific insight into civil society and its actors in 'post-soviet' spaces.

The first paper of this special section focuses on civil society actors in the environmental movement (Selivanova and Franceschelli, in this issue). In their paper, Selivanova and Franceschelli explore civil society actors aiming to change policy in the face of increased state repression and a shrinking space for civil society (Toepler et al., 2020). For this, the authors operationalise Petrova and Tarrow's (2007) participatory-transactional activism framework to examine the social movement organisations 'RazDel'niy Sbor' (RS) in St. Petersburg, Russia. RS started off intending to engage the public and generate public participation in waste separation. However, to institutionalise and have a lasting impact on environmental practices, RS realised the need to engage with and get support from the state and its actors (in this case, local government). Selivanova and Franceschelli highlight how RS engage in both participative (engaging the public) and transactional (engaging with the state) approaches to further its aims. Their paper demonstrates the interchangeable nature of these approaches to activism used by civil society actors in a hostile operating environment. RS presents an interesting case as it allows the authors to look at newly established civil society actors who lack institutional embeddedness but were nonetheless able to engage in transaction activism, which are activities that require access to networks in the institutional set-up of the state. Mirroring the insight

from others (Ljubownikow & Crotty, 2016; Moser & Skripchenko, 2018; Tysiachniouk et al., 2018), a key component of RS's mobilisation strategy has been focused on 'depoliticised' their activities – even those that aim to change policy. This enables Selivanova and Franceschelli to contribute to the growing literature that illustrates ways in which civil society actors can raise and advance their agendas within hostile institutional contexts (Dai & Spires, 2018; Li et al., 2017; Ljubownikow & Crotty, 2016; Zeng et al., 2019). In this specific case, this speaks to the observation by others about civil society in Russia of *the more it changes, the more it stays the same* (Crotty, 2006; Ljubownikow et al., 2013). This paper also serves as a reminder of the localised and placed-based nature of civil society and its engagement with the state and its agents, as well as the impotence of civil society actors in restrictive contexts to challenge the state in a meaningful way.

The second paper in this special collection focuses specifically on the advocacy activities of civil society actors. In this paper, Davidenko and Iarskaia-Smirnova (this issue) examine administrative advocacy by civil society actors in Russia's repressive authoritarian regime. In so doing, Davidenko and Iarskaia-Smirnova also illustrate the limited spaces for engagement that civil society actors have, mirroring others that explored advocacy in this context (Ljubownikow & Crotty, 2016; Pape & Skokova, 2022). The authors illustrate that a key characteristic of a repressive regime is legislative ambiguity (Dai & Spires, 2018; Howell, 2012; Ljubownikow & Crotty, 2016) which enables the state and its governance system flexibility in enforcement or regulation (something Ledeneva (2006) terms suspended punishment in the context of Russia) ensuring everyone is being kept *on their toes* as well as widespread acquiescence *just in case* (Ljubownikow & Crotty, 2022). However, Davidenko and Iarskaia-Smirnova demonstrate that this can also provide opportunities for civil society actors to engage with the state and its administrative system. To explore the ability of civil society actors to exploit such policy opportunity structures, Davidenko and Iarskaia-Smirnova examine the activities of civil society actors focused on reducing violence against women. Violence against women is a contested policy field in the Russian Federation as it is often seen as going counter to the 'traditional family' values discourses promoted by the state (Johnson, 2023). As in the first paper, the authors illustrated the local focus of civil society actors in terms of advancing their aims. The paper illustrates how actors, at the local level, can engage with the administrative apparatus of the state to advocacy and influence practices. However, much of this remains reliant on personal connections within governance networks, rather than institutionalised ways of engagement accessible to all. Consequently, the paper adds to the growing literature on advocacy by civil society actors in repressive and restrictive operating environments. Russia's crackdown on rights-based organisations leading up to and after the beginning of the war in Ukraine is a further indication of

the increasing futile engagement in advocacy in such a context but also the state-capture of governance networks illustrated by Davidenko and Iarskaia-Smirnova.

In the third paper in this special section, Mullins (this issue) examines civil society actors that address issues around disability in Russia. Like the first two papers, this paper illustrates the dominating and restrictive nature of the Russian state and, as a consequence, the limitations that civil society actors experience, in particular with regard to what Mullins refers to as political activities or actions. Thus, in this assertion, the paper dovetails with other research illustrating that civil society actors focus on the social or economic issues (Ljubownikow & Crotty, 2016; Pape & Skokova, 2022) instead of the more contentious issue of human rights. Echoing the broader literature on Russian civil society, the paper highlights this often as a tactical choice by civil society actors (Crotty & Ljubownikow, 2020; Moser & Skripchenko, 2018; Tysiachniouk et al., 2018). As such, this paper illustrates how civil society actors might need to engage in camouflaging what they do to achieve their aims and pursue their agendas, if these are at odds with that of a restrictive state (Claus & Tracey, 2019; Neuberger et al., 2023). Mullins highlights the subjectivity and rhetoric approach of actors within one such context. In focusing on less contested rights issues, those that allow the state to accommodate claims without it representing a challenge to the regime maintenance (Henry, 2012; Ljubownikow & Crotty, 2022), actors in Mullin's study can advance their agendas. In exploring the subjectivity of individuals in decisions about rights and associated activities, the paper aims to expand our understanding of civil society and social movements and their response to coercive pressures. Drawing on 61 interviews and using thematic analysis, the paper illustrates the nuanced and subjective perception of rights and the distinctions made by actors about what types of rights and associated claims are possible in Russia's hostile environment. The insight offered by this rich data highlights the nuances of the rhetorical and discursive tensions and distinctions that actors consider in their decision-making. It also illustrates how, as a result, activities are often focused on challenging and changing practices rather than changing policy – i.e., change within the boundaries set by the state, even activities that are camouflaging wider changes to the institutional context (Crotty & Ljubownikow, 2020; Pape & Skokova, 2022; Toepler & Fröhlich, 2020). As such, it aligns with the first two papers in this special section and the extent literature in both Russian and other similar contexts illustrates that in hostile and repressive context civil society actors focus/are forced to focus on social or welfare activities (or similar activities that do not elicit a negative elite response) rather than those that directly engage in activities challenging institutional arrangements (Claus & Tracey, 2019; Crotty & Ljubownikow, 2020; Dai & Spires, 2018; Kulmala, 2016; Ljubownikow & Crotty, 2022; Neuberger et al., 2023; Pape & Skokova, 2022). In shining a light on how subject understandings inform actions, the paper illustrates the use of perception/portrayal of competence

to make claims against the state and change local practices (Crotty & Ljubownikow, 2020; Zeng et al., 2019).

In the fourth paper in this special section, Mikheieva and Kuznetsova (in this issue) examine volunteering in the context of a protracted war. The paper focuses on volunteering activities around internally displaced people in Ukraine post-2014. This paper focuses on a critical activity to civil society and its actors within a context in which internally displaced people (IDPs) can create significant societal challenges. In their focus on Ukraine, the authors illustrate that within this context, IDPs relied heavily on voluntary help as both international and domestic responses were slow to get off the ground in 2014. The authors illustrate that much of this voluntary activity and associated help came from within IDP communities themselves. In exploring this, the authors speak to the broader literature on civil society in Ukraine as well as the key feature of informality highlighted by the extended literature (Channell-Justice, 2022; Gatskova & Gatskov, 2016; Krasynska & Martin, 2017; Martsenyuk & Troian, 2018). Bringing together different studies to take a longitudinal view, Mikheieva and Kuznetsova draw on quantitative and qualitative analysis to illustrate how it was volunteers and not the state that first engaged with IDP in 2014. In illustrating the volunteering practices, they can highlight how practices and approaches that emerged in 2014 contributed to addressing the IDP crisis that followed Russia's 2022 invasion. In framing their ideas, the authors mirror others in showing the pivotal role the Euromaidan protest played in the development and understanding of civil society in Ukraine (Channell-Justice, 2022; Gatskova & Gatskov, 2016; Krasynska & Martin, 2017; Onuch, 2014, 2021). In exploring IDPs voluntary engagements to help IDPs, the authors also illuminate the positive nature of accompanying public discourses. This starkly contrasts the often-negative discourses civil society actors face in more hostile contexts, as illustrated in the first three papers on this special section. The author's study also illustrates that the flexible and dynamic nature of the informal volunteer response to the crisis in 2014 addressed the state's failure to do so at the time, and the localised and community-natured focus of such responses. In taking a more longitudinal approach, the paper also provides some insight into the difficulty of institutionalisation and formalisation of many bottom-up activities, particularly regarding required resources (time, money, and human resources). However, the authors highlight that the voluntary response to the 2014 IDP crisis led to the establishment of new practices of collaboration amongst civil society, businesses, and state actors. As a result, the actors were in a better position to cope with the high numbers of IDPs in 2022.

These four articles have illustrated how some civil society actors have had to adapt to survive. Despite looking at separate institutional context and issues, all four papers focus on practices and processes that civil society actor shape or influence. In more hostile contexts, this

seems to come at the expense of creating a strong and established counterweight to the state. It does seem that civil society is able to 'thrive' within the boundaries set by the state (Crotty & Ljubownikow, 2020) but, at the same time, not able to 'prevent' the increasing authoritarianism. The commonalities across the first three papers also highlight that the often-hyperlocal nature of civil society actors' focus and activity has effectively given the Russian state absolutist power. The fourth paper, despite illustrating the significant institutional challenges civil society actors face, paints a more upbeat picture of the development of civil society in the post-soviet context. In a context that is open or aims to open up to democratic practices, such as Ukraine, civil society actors can make a critical contribution, even in times of crisis. However, across all four papers, the local focus of what civil society actors do is also reflective of the fragmentation of civil society and its actors that has characterised civil society across this region after the Soviet Union collapsed (Crotty, 2009).

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