

ACTIVISTS IN THE TRAP OF ANTI-POLITICS: AN EXPLORATION OF THE POWERLESSNESS OF HUMAN RIGHTS NGOs IN RUSSIA

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In Russia, the “democratic transition” took place about ten years after the transitions in Latin America: the democratic period began in Argentina in 1983, while the Soviet Union disappeared in 1991. Many comparative works have highlighted the role played by civil societies in the fall of these authoritarian regimes (Okuneva 1994; Khoros 1998; Vizgunova 2001; Vorozheikina 2001; Meier-Dallach and Juchler 2002). Andrew Arato and Jean Cohen (1993:2) were “truly impressed by the importance in East Europe and Latin America, as well as in the advanced capitalist democracies, of the struggle for rights and their expansion, of the establishment of grassroots associations and initiatives and the ever renewed construction of institutions and forums of critical publics.” However, ten years later, at the end of the 1990s, as disappointment with the democratization process grew, scholars insisted that the weakness of civil society in Russia was to blame for the failure of the transition. “As regards civil society, it is profoundly isolated: the voluntary and independent union that realizes concerted action is a rarity in our country. Citizens retreat in the face of the state, which, having established complete control over the political sphere, never ceases to extend its participation in the social sphere,” writes Maria Lipman (2006:2). Russian sociologists highlight the differences between Russia and the Latin American countries. Tatiana Vorozheikina (2001:8) underlines similarities in the state’s control of social organizations in Stalin’s USSR and in the Latin American dictatorships, but considers that “in the Latin American countries (Brazil, Argentina, Chile, Peru, and Mexico), the dominance of the state over society was not as strong [as in Russia].” In Latin America, “the people’s organizations, faced with repressive state power, became politicized: civil society became a substitute for

political opposition" (14). Russia has seen no such evolution, be it in the Soviet period or today. "After ten years of democratic transition, a system of political authorities unaccountable to society was established, where elections, since 1996, constitute plebiscites on the leadership in place" (16). For what reasons did civil society fail to become a substitute for political opposition in Russia?

To answer this vast question, I will focus on the human rights movement in Russia and its attitude toward politics. In his companion paper on accountability struggles in democratic Argentina (this issue), Peruzzotti begins his analysis with the emergence of a human rights movement during the last dictatorship to highlight the significance of this movement and its contribution to a new democratic political culture organized around a concern for rights and constitutionalism. In Russia, the human rights movement also played an important role in reforming the Soviet system and considered itself "as the avant-garde of civil society" (Daniel' 2004:35). At the end of the 1980s, former dissidents decided to participate in the development of civil society through the creation of nongovernmental organizations.¹ Well-known Russian organizations such as *Memorial*, the Moscow Helsinki Group, and Committees of Soldiers' Mothers worked to democratize the country.² However, their influence gradually waned. While Peruzzotti tells us that the human rights movement in Argentina was able to contribute to the new democratic political culture that, in turn, produced a second generation of civic actors and the new models of accountability that they created, the influence of human rights associations in Russian politics has been rather marginal. If we try to compare the two countries, we find that, as Peruzzotti writes, "the accountability model of representation is inextricably tied to the legitimacy of the new Argentine democracy," while in Russia, "the current federal and regional authorities depart dramatically from its basic functions, from the initial missions of a democratic state: the implementation of the rights and the legal interests of the citizens" (Vdovin 2008). In order to explain the variety of relationships between the state and human rights NGOs, I propose a sociological analysis of human rights activists' attitudes toward politics.

MIXING HUMAN RIGHTS AND POLITICS IN GORBACHEV'S RUSSIA

SOCIO-POLITICAL MOVEMENTS IN LATE SOVIET RUSSIA

The first period of development of human rights NGOs in Russia displays some similarities with the development of the human rights movement in Argentina. In Russia, the first human rights associations appeared and developed under the authoritarian regime. In Argentina, the human rights movement arose during the military administration that governed the country between 1976 and 1983. In the

1 I adopt here a narrow definition of civil society as NGOs. As Béatrice Pouligny (2001:163) writes, "in France, 'civil society' is usually equated with NGOs, while in the United States and in Canada, labor unions, companies, and consulting firms are part of civil society."

2 I agree with Lisa McIntosh Sundstrom (2006:16) that in the area of human rights work, the Committees of Soldiers' Mothers "boast representation in nearly every major city of Russia and are extremely popular and well-known among the Russian population."

USSR, the movement was created in the 1960s and survived through the 1970s and 1980s. The so-called “dissident movement” was comprised of various groups united in the defense of human rights. Political dissidence, cultural movements, religious circles, and ethnic groupings developed in opposition to the Soviet regime. Outlawed and repressed by the Soviet state, they fought for civil rights. During the perestroika initiated by Mikhail Gorbachev, human rights groups were gradually recognized. Initially, these movements were often qualified as “informal movements” by contrast with Party-affiliated organizations; however, they were gradually legalized, particularly within the framework of the 1990 law on civic organizations (*obshchestvennye organizatsii*). Former dissidents came together in newly legalized associations.

After the relatively free parliamentary elections of 1989, there was increasing confusion as to what constituted civic as opposed to political activity, illustrated by the emergence of so-called socio-political movements. A 1991 handbook of independent clubs, associations, and movements lists the new socio-political organizations (*novye obshchestvenno-politicheskie organizatsii*). As one of its authors explains, looking back at the perestroika period: “at the time, the main problem was recognizing political liberties in addition to civil rights and civil liberties. And so appeared a number of social and political organizations (*politicheskie obshchestvennye organizatsii*)” (Petrenko 2001). From 1989, electoral campaigns in the USSR directly involved the informal organizations in political life. Most organizations had misgivings about this development. In the end, Boris Yeltsin succeeded in marshaling the nascent civic movements to serve his rise to power, despite their leaders’ hesitations. The notion of socio-political (*obshchestvenno-politicheskaia*) activity was frequently used to describe the political character of social commitments, illustrating the confusion between associations and political parties. This confusion is not specific to Russia. As Cas Mudde noted (2003:160), one of the characteristics of the communist regimes in Eastern Europe was a ban on political parties. For this reason, the difference between the new political parties, civil society organizations, and the state was often vague in the initial phases of democratization.

In Russia, human rights defenders were encouraged in their socio-political initiatives by the new Soviet leaders’ reactions. Both Mikhail Gorbachev and Boris Yeltsin supported collective initiatives. Perestroika is probably the period during which cooperation between human rights NGOs and the regime was the strongest. Activists felt that they could influence the political regime and its transformation. For example, leaders of the Soldiers’ Mothers’ Committee developed contacts with the administration and the military in order to help their sons. They had the most influence under Gorbachev. In 1990, the head of the Soldiers’ Mothers’ Committee had a personal meeting with Gorbachev. On November 15, 1990, the Soviet president signed a decree “On measures to implement the proposals of the Soldiers’ Mothers’ Committee.” He created a commission to investigate the causes of deaths in the army, and asked the Supreme Soviet to study the recommendations of the committee for military reform (Daucé 1997:138). After the dissolution of the USSR, the Soldiers’ Mothers remembered the Gorbachev period with nostalgia.

During the final years of perestroika, the distinction between civic and political activism was blurred. The political scene was opened to the defenders of human rights, as demonstrated by the success of some of them in winning elected mandates. According to Anne White, "the Memorial Society is one of the most important organizations of the perestroika period [...] It became the first nationwide organization working towards the creation of a civil society; the parent of many new political parties; and a springboard for the political careers of many leading figures" (White 1995:1343). However, the former dissidents had a peculiar understanding of political commitment. Andrei Sakharov, a member of *Memorial*, agreed to participate in electoral campaigns and was elected to parliament. In an interview given in September 1989, a few months before his death, Sakharov explained his vision of politics. Describing the Interregional Group in the Congress of People's Deputies, of which he was a member, he stressed: "It is not a party: there are no structures, no status, no programs. It is not obligatory and it is not necessary. The members of the group have the same point of view on some essential questions but not on all" (Sakharov 1989). Even when involved in politics, former dissidents did not want to act within the framework of institutionalized political parties. After Sakharov's death, former dissident Sergei Kovalev became a Duma deputy (he was elected on the Democratic Choice for Russia list and then on the Union of Right Forces ticket from 1993 till 2003). Kovalev was also very reluctant to become involved in politics. In the Supreme Soviet, he was the president of the Committee for Human Rights. As he explained: "Democratic political parties are the tools of civil society, not the other way round" (Pravozashchitnoe dvizhenie 2005:180). He himself was not considered a political leader. As Liudmila Alekseeva from the Moscow Helsinki Group commented: "Sergei Kovalev decided to enter politics. I cannot criticize this decision. He is our man in politics. He is still a human rights defender. He defends our civil interests with political tools" (188).

THE CIVIC PREFERENCES OF HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS

The majority of human rights defenders gave up direct political commitment because they harbored suspicions of the party system.³ At the end of perestroika, former dissidents and human rights activists preferred to create associations rather than political parties to challenge the domination of the Communist Party of the USSR. This strategy was consistent with theories of democratic transition. According to Larry Diamond, one way "in which civil society may serve democracy is by creating channels other than political parties for the articulation, aggregation, and representation of interests" (1994:8). The idea of a clear distinction between political parties and civil associations was introduced in order to end the monopoly of the Communist Party and of the "social organizations" subjected to its control. Diamond explained that

3 The case of Valeriia Novodvorskaia, a radical democratic activist, appears to be an exception. In 1988, she created the ultraliberal Democratic Union Party. She later ran for the State Duma. Human rights activists who choose to enter politics are often viewed with amusement by other activists.

civil society encompasses a vast array of organizations, formal and informal. These include groups that are [...] *civic* (seeking in a non-partisan fashion to improve the political system and make it more democratic through human rights monitoring, voter education and mobilization, poll-watching, anticorruption efforts, and so on)" (6).

Cohen and Arato argued that "it is necessary and meaningful to distinguish civil society from both a political society of parties, political organizations, and political publics (in particular, parliaments) and an economic society composed of organizations of production and distribution, usually firms, cooperatives, partnerships, and so on" (1992:ix). In Russia, human rights activists lobbied for the creation of associations, rather than involvement in political parties, in order to monitor the state and political parties in general.

It is therefore necessary to point out, albeit briefly, that the dissidents' conception of civil society was not without problems [...] Civil society was also problematically portrayed as a sphere of activity superior to the 'political' realm in both social and moral terms. As a consequence, it strengthened the hostility and suspicion towards those claiming legitimacy via attachment to institutions, particularly towards those engaging in newly formed political parties (Kopecký, 2003:5).

Most human rights leaders have a background in a protest tradition arising from a particular vision of politics. The dissidents' hostility toward the single party and its ideology increased over time. The former dissident Aleksandr Daniel' emphasized that the activists of the 1960s and the "children of the Twentieth Congress" form a generation that harshly rejected the idea of "politics." "They were people hostile to ideology" (Daniel' 2002:56). According to him, "the non-political and non-ideological nature of Soviet dissidence is not coincidental. This phenomenon arose from politics and ideology" (54). Apoliticism was considered a weapon against the regime. Moreover, even a cursory anthropological analysis of their day-to-day contacts shows that, within the dissident networks, activists relied on strong trust based on more or less intense relations of proximity that are hardly compatible with partisan commitment. These close relations expanded from the most intimate and most familial links to interpersonal sympathies. A large variety of friendly connections supported ties that did not appear to be explicitly political. Among human rights activists today there are many former dissidents who remember that their commitment was based on private arrangements to escape Soviet power. To take only one example, Boris Pustyntsev and Iurii Vdovin, leaders of the association *Grazhdanskii kontrol'* (Citizens' Watch) in Saint Petersburg, met during the Soviet era "in a jazz club [...] where people who had 'aesthetic differences' with the regime met. We spoke not about politics but about our love of jazz, a music based on improvisation, which supposed a spirit of independence and freedom of thought" (*Pravozashchitnoe dvizhenie* 2004:137). By focusing on friendships, the dissidents insisted on the

importance of domestic⁴ relations among members of this movement. According to Daniel' (2002:55), dissident networks were based on a specific culture of social behavior, a vision of the world, and ethics, but especially, at first, on "friendly links" (*uzy druzhby*). However, these forms of relations remained difficult to define in public. Authors who focus on that dissident discourse centered on the kitchen table, where close friends could talk heart-to-heart, rarely discuss implications for the public sphere (Ries 1997:92).

What is the best way to conceptualize post-Soviet groups that based their activities on these principles? The activists themselves hesitate between the terms "independent civil associations" (*nezavisimye grazhdanskije assotsiatsii*), "groups" (*gruppy*), "consortiums" (*konsortsiумы*), and "groups of friends" (*kompanii*). But there is never reference to parties or politics. Former dissident networks bring together activists with different political convictions. Their rejection of politics allows them to engineer a "peaceful coexistence among supporters of different political doctrines (from anarchists to monarchists, including supporters of liberal democracy and nationalists)" (Daucé 2006:65). As a consequence, newly created human rights organizations were often conceived by former dissidents as nonprofit (*nekommercheskie*) and nongovernmental (*nepravitel'stvennie*) legal entities. As some of the leaders of *Memorial* explained in 2003, "the *Memorial* association is not a political party. It brings together people united by a common civic sensibility too large to be reduced to the electoral program of any one party. The idea of the individual responsibility of each citizen for the country's future is part of this ideal" (*Pravozashchitniki i vybory* 2003). The rejection of politics reflects their vision of civil society in post-Soviet Russia. *Memorial* is presented as a "civic initiative against a totalitarian legacy" and as an "intellectual and organizational center for the development of civil society in Russia" (*Pravozashchitnoe dvizhenie*, 2004:172).

THE DIFFERENTIATION OF CIVIL AND POLITICAL ORGANIZATIONS

Despite the legitimacy attained by human rights associations in the Russian democratization process after 1991, these organizations gradually lost their influence. Civil leaders' rejection of politics led to their progressive marginalization. Associations quickly lost positions of power in the new regime and were kept at a distance from the new institutions. In Argentina, according to Peruzzotti, "the post-human rights movement stage has been characterized by the consolidation of a specialized group of NGOs and civic associations that show a common concern for increasing the transparency and accountability of representative government," but in Russia, this transformation did not occur. NGOs suffered from the decline of the liberal parties and were obliged to withdraw to circles (*kruzhki*) of human rights defender. Nevertheless, during the 1990s, their resources and those of their—more or less informal—contacts within the administration allowed them to consolidate their positions in the civil sphere.

4 In the sense of the "domestic order of worth" as defined by Boltanski and Thévenot (2006).

THE CONSOLIDATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS NGOS

After the collapse of the USSR, human rights NGOs still hoped to participate in Russian democratization. Activists thought at first that the democratic institutions would allow them to play a critical role in Russian political life. Civil control over the administration was presented as a priority of the new government. In the early 1990s, associations benefited from the support of the liberal members of the Congress of People's Deputies. Institutions guaranteeing respect for human rights were created. The position of an ombudsman for human rights was established by the Declaration of Human Rights and Civil Liberties in the Russian Federation, adopted on November 22, 1991. According to this text, the ombudsman should be a representative of civil society, appointed by parliament in order to monitor respect for human rights in Russia. In the Constitution of 1993, Article 103 indicates that the authority to appoint and dismiss the ombudsman resides with the State Duma. Sergei Kovalev served as chairman of the President's Human Rights Commission and Human Rights Commissioner for the Russian parliament from 1994 to 1996.

During the 1990s, Russian human rights defenders enjoyed international legitimacy. They obtained financial support from international institutions and NGOs within the framework of programs to develop civil society. Lisa McIntosh Sundstrom wrote that "billions of dollars from the budgets of state foreign assistance agencies and Western nongovernmental organizations do in fact contribute significantly to the development of civil society and, in turn, to the institutionalization of a liberal democratic regime" (2006:xiv). From 1992 to 1998, USAID spent about 92 million dollars to support civic initiatives in Russia (Henderson, 2002:141). Private organizations also participated in the funding of Russian associations; for example, the Soros Foundation spent about 1 billion dollars between 1988 and 2003. These grants allowed Russian associations to buy computers, rent offices, and finance programs. From the middle of the 1990s, some associations received support from large financial groups founded by oligarchs. For example, Boris Berezovskii supported the Sakharov Foundation in Moscow. International human rights groups operated freely in Russia, although the government has hindered the movement and access to information of some individuals investigating the war in Chechnya.

Contacts between activists and Russian civil servants were established, mainly on an informal and local basis. These contacts were important. Brian Taylor, for example, described cooperation between civil society organizations and state law enforcement agencies in Russia. As he explains, many associations developed a cooperative relationship with law-enforcement agencies, but, "to varying degrees, the projects relied heavily or exclusively on foreign funding, their fortunes were dependent on a small number of committed and well-placed individuals, and the long-term sustainability of the work was in doubt" (Taylor 2006:208). Relationships between civic activists and civil servants are generally considered part of "informal relations" in the country. To illustrate this idea, the example of the Soldiers' Mothers' Committee is quite useful. Officially, the Committee is critical of the Ministry of Defense, denouncing military service, the war in Chechnya, and hazing in the barracks, among other issues. However, it has developed informal relations with some parts

of the defense administration in order to be able to provide personal assistance to soldiers asking the Committee for help. Valentina Mel'nikova, the secretary of the Union of Committees of Soldiers' Mothers, openly acknowledges her contacts with representatives of the General Army Prosecutor's Office and the Central Medical Commission. These relationships allow the activists to promote their interests inside the administration. However, these kinds of relations are often very fragile, because they depend on personal links. As Mel'nikova explains, "there are no real laws. The system is pernicious. Only personal contacts are important" (Daucé 1997:151). These kinds of relationships are common in post-Soviet Russia (Kliamkin and Timofeev 2000). Their development is problematic because it is based on personal links and cannot be institutionalized or publicized. Informal relations foster social practices linked to closeness and networks of friends, rather than civic and political involvement (Désert 2006).

REMOVAL FROM POLITICAL POWER

Most authors consider 1993 a turning point in the Russian transition (MacFaul 1999:185–189). As Andrei Medushevskii (2005) explains,

the negotiated model (*dogovornaiia model'*) of transition to democracy was useful for many political regimes in the world. It was implemented in South Africa, in many countries of Latin America (Brazil, Argentina, Columbia), and in East European countries. This model was initially a reference (*orientir*) for Russian politics of the post-Soviet period, but it was impossible to implement in the context of the constitutional revolution which took place in 1993.

The armed repression of the parliament and the reinforcement of presidential powers illustrated the Yeltsin regime's new rules for Russian politics. While the Constitution of 1993 recognized civil rights, the Russian state administration in practice distanced itself from human rights associations. After the dissolution of the USSR, Boris Yeltsin forgot his former supporters from the human rights and civil organizations. Whereas the Gorbachev administration had some interest in the development of these movements, the Yeltsin government neglected the associations' demands. In the Yeltsin administration, a redistribution of power took place between reformers (such as Egor Gaidar and his team) and former Soviet bureaucrats (Viktor Chernomyrdin became prime minister in December 1992). The reformers managed to maintain control over financial and economic institutions, the media, and large public companies, but lost their monopoly over political orientations. As Peter Reddaway and Dmitri Glinski argue, in 1992, "Russia's emerging independent political class suddenly lost its organizational base. The values of a radical, idealistic restructuring of society that it preached were quickly and purposefully discredited, and its place in politics was largely swallowed up by the old and new nomenklatura" (Reddaway and Glinski 2001).

During the 1990s, civic activists were ready to act as a countervailing power but were marginalized. Following parliament's dissolution, legislative elections were organized. On December 12, 1993, liberal parties retained only a minority of seats in

the Duma. Russia's Choice, the party of Egor Gaidar, Sergei Kovalev, and Ella Pamfilova, obtained 96 deputies out of a total of 450. Nationalist and communist parties obtained most of the seats. This trend was confirmed in 1995 and 1999, as patriotic and nationalist parties won the elections and liberal groups were defeated. In 1999, Egor Gaidar's party, Democratic Choice of Russia, was replaced by the Union of Right Forces party. Sergei Kovalev was still elected on its list but the liberals were in a minority in the Duma. Electoral changes in Russia were unfavorable to human rights activists.

Despite institutional innovations and the appointment of a Commissioner for Human Rights, the Yeltsin government (1991–9) had little interest in civil accountability and civil control. The main political decisions, especially decrees about the use of the army inside the country (against the parliament in October 1993 and in Chechnya in December 1994), were adopted in the face of opposition from human rights defenders. This lack of interest in civic activists was illustrated by the first war in Chechnya (1994–6), when in December 1994, President Yeltsin sent Russian troops to the secessionist republic. This decision was denounced by human rights organizations: *Memorial*, The Moscow Helsinki Committee, the Committees of Soldiers' Mothers, and many other organizations alerted public opinion and military officials to violence against civilian populations and violations of conscripts' rights in the army, which was now engaged in war. This campaign had little effect; human rights organizations had no mass support, and only a few hundred activists participated in anti-war demonstrations. The Constitutional Court supported the presidential *ukaz* of 1994 on the dispatch of Russian troops to Chechnya. In 1996, Sergei Kovalev resigned as chairman of the Presidential Human Rights Commission and as Human Rights Commissioner to protest the government's record, particularly the war in Chechnya. In May 1998, the Duma finally selected Duma deputy Oleg Mironov, member of the Communist Party, as new Human Rights Commissioner. Because of his party affiliation, and because Mironov had no evident expertise in the field of human rights, his appointment was widely criticized at the time by human rights activists.

As a consequence, from 1994 on, when Russian human rights defenders made reference to Argentina, it was no longer for the democratization process but for its authoritarian past. Oleg Orlov, from *Memorial*, stated that "state terror in Chechnya is more intense than the terror of the military junta in Argentina in the 1970s, which everybody in the world knows as a horrible example" (Orlov 2006). In 2006, Natalia Estemirova emphasized that "the torture and disappearance of people as in Chechnya was not a specific Russian problem. Many countries of Latin America, Africa, and the Middle East have endured these practices. In these countries too, people suffered from civil disorder and violence" (Estemirova 2006).

FROM NONGOVERNMENTAL TO NONPOLITICAL ORGANIZATIONS

Since the arrival of Vladimir Putin to the presidency in 2000, human rights organizations have been asked to modify their relationship with the Russian state. The Putin regime believes that civil society organizations should cooperate with and help the administration. In 2003, for example, the Human Rights Commission under

the President of the Russian Federation organized a forum for Russian NGOs which was defined as “an event bringing together experts in order to facilitate the emergence of effective solutions by taking into account the interests of society and the state authorities” (Information Letter 2003). In the president’s speeches, the Russian acronym NPO (*nepravitel’stvennaia organizatsiia* – nongovernmental organization) is now often understood as standing for a “non-political organization” (*nepoliticheskaia organizatsiia*). While the 1990s saw a differentiation between political parties and human rights NGOs, the next project was to break off cooperation between these two kinds of institutions. In this context, human rights activists face a dilemma. On the one hand, they are interested in cooperation with the state in order to improve their influence. On the other hand, they are afraid that, due to the lack of pluralism and opposition parties, cooperation with the state can only produce total submission to the administration. In the context of a closed political sphere, involvement in politics, while sometimes deemed desirable (though at odds with the dissident legacy), is impossible institutionally.

VLADIMIR PUTIN'S MODEL OF CIVIL SOCIETY

In his official statements, Vladimir Putin promised to sustain and develop civil society in Russia, thus using the former slogans of liberal reformers. But his conception of civil society is specific and consistent with his “vertical” conception of power. On November 2001, the Kremlin hosted the Civic Forum, an event that brought together some 3,500 representatives of NGOs and members of the Russian government for a two-day conference. The president and government ministers claimed that an effective and democratic state requires a strong, well-organized, and independent civil society. However, human rights activists were doubtful about the government’s real intentions and denounced attempts by Putin to co-opt Russia’s independent associations to mask authoritarian plans. For most activists, the Civic Forum was a disappointment. In 2001, representatives of *Memorial* took part in the Civic Forum but in 2002, the association decided to leave the Permanent Working Group on Chechnya that had been created during that event. *Memorial* explained that its proposals were not heard by the state administration.

In 2004, after his re-election as president of the Russian Federation, Putin put new emphasis on state-society relationships. In the wake of the “color revolutions” in the CIS, the Russian president and his team decided to assume firm control over independent organizations in Russia. Particular targets of the Kremlin have been those NGOs that work on controversial issues such as human rights, those active in sensitive regions such as the North Caucasus, those that receive foreign funding, and those seeking to galvanize legitimate public dissent. Putin has tried to control these associations in the same way in which he has managed to control political parties (Verkhovskii 2006). In his 2004 address to the Federal Assembly, Putin declared:

I would like to say a few words about the role of nonpolitical civic organizations. In our country, there are thousands of civic associations and unions that work constructively. But not all of them are oriented toward standing up for people’s

real interests. For some of these organizations, the priority is to receive financing from influential foreign foundations. Others serve dubious groups and commercial interests. And the most serious problems of the country and its citizens remain unnoticed. I must say that when violations of fundamental and basic human rights are concerned, when people's real interests are infringed upon, such organizations often fail to raise their voice. And this is not surprising: they simply cannot bite the hand that feeds them (Putin 2004).

Since 2005, there have been institutional innovations with respect to civil society in Russia. A Civic Chamber was created in order to represent civil society vis-à-vis the government. This new institution was designed to channel citizens' interaction with state authorities and local governments to take into account the needs and interests of citizens, and protect their rights and freedoms in the development and implementation of public policies, as well as the implementation of societal control over the authorities' actions. However, the way in which members of the Civic Chamber are appointed demonstrates the conception of politics harbored by the presidential administration. The first forty-two members are chosen by the president. They nominate forty-two representatives from nationally active civic organizations. These eighty-four members then choose forty-two representatives of regional associations. This nomination process is clearly based on a top-down principle. In January 2006, Putin signed into law a controversial bill regulating NGOs. The act requires NGOs operating in Russia to re-register with the government, disclose their funding sources, and undergo increased state auditing. This bill clearly has increased administrative controls over independent organizations. In January 2008, First Deputy Prime Minister and future President Dmitri Medvedev gave his first policy address at the session of the Second All-Russian Civic Forum, which was organized by the Public Chamber and brought together Russian civic organizations. About 1,300 delegates attended the speech, most of which was devoted to the government's social programs aimed at improving the situation in education, housing, and health care. Welfare thus appears to be the area in which civil society is able to exert pressure on the government.

The government favors the establishment of loyal associations (GONGOs—*Government-Operated Nongovernmental Organizations*). These organizations are supported and funded by the administration. They have developed a strong patriotic discourse in all spheres of civic involvement. "The creation of government-organised NGOs—GONGOs—appears to have been devised by Russian officials to tackle criticism at international forums and to demonstrate the existence of Russian societal norms, including norms concerning human rights," Elena Klitsounova (2008) suggests. Since 2000, these organizations have acted with increasingly visibility. GONGOs have developed in all spheres of national or international interest. A new organization called "*Soprotivlenie. Pravozashchitnoe dvizhenie*" (Resistance—A Human Rights Movement) was created in 2005 in cooperation with the State Duma in order to challenge the independent human rights movements (Muhamed'iarova, 2005). The Council of Military Parents (*Sovet roditelei voennosluzhashchikh Rossii*) (Chernova 2003) works to counter the Committees of Soldiers' Mothers. It is supported by the

Ministry of Defense and mainly organizes charitable activities for soldiers. In 2007, a member of the Civic Chamber, Anatolii Kucherena, announced the creation of a "Russian human rights organization for monitoring the observance of freedom of speech and fundamental human rights in the United States, Europe, and other Western nations." In November 2007, at the EU-Russia summit in Mafra, Putin revealed plans to establish a Russian "nongovernmental" institute of freedom and democracy in Europe.

The existence of GONGOs limits the possibilities for independent associations to collaborate with the administration. The latter is invited to limit its collaboration with organizations receiving foreign funding. In 2005, at a Kremlin meeting of the Council for Promoting the Development of Civil Society Institutions and for Human Rights, President Putin said: "I object categorically to foreign funding of political activity in the Russian Federation. I object to it categorically. Not a single self-respecting country allows that and neither will we." Political attacks were launched against some human rights groups' funding and their links with foreign partners. The examples could be multiplied over and over again. Thus, some Committees of Soldiers' Mothers were accused of collusion with foreign interests. In 2003, Igor Lebed, prosecutor of the Leningrad military district, accused the Committee of Soldiers' Mothers of Saint Petersburg of receiving funding from obscure sources and promoting desertion among young soldiers. The soldiers' mothers were denounced as "saboteur mothers." (Kedrova 2003:2). In October 2004, State Duma Deputy Viktor Alksnis accused the Union of Soldiers' Mothers Committees of being "a foreign agent" seeking to undermine the defense capability of the armed forces and said he would demand a federal investigation. In January 2006, the Russian Federal Security Service accused several employees of the British Embassy in Moscow of espionage and of funding Russian NGOs. British spies and members of the Moscow Helsinki Group were supposedly in communication, wirelessly transferring information from a computer to equipment planted in a stone in a Moscow park. These examples contributed to the decline of opportunities for informal cooperation between the administration and human rights defenders. As the leader of an independent association explained in 2008:

As we know, nothing unites the population as much as a foreign enemy. During the last elections, Great Britain and the United States and foreign states in general constituted the external enemy. That is why, during the elections, almost all the organs of political power were afraid of working with us because of our funding. People with whom we have worked for five or six years began to be afraid of working with us (Airapetian 2009).

The extra-institutional possibilities for influence are increasingly reduced for defenders of human rights in Russia today and can no longer compensate for their political decline.

THE POLITICAL UNEASE OF HUMAN RIGHTS ORGANIZATIONS

Since the turn of the twenty-first century, a widespread decline of associative and political pluralism in Russia has become evident. As a result of the legislative

elections of 2003, liberal parties such as Yabloko and the Union of Right Forces lost their last deputies in the Duma. Sergei Kovalev, who ran on the Union of Right Forces list, was not re-elected. These elections really constituted a shock for human rights defenders. As an activist explained in 2003: "Before, there were some representatives with whom we worked in the Duma. Now, there is no longer anybody."⁵ In March 2004, Putin was re-elected as president with 70% of the votes after the first round. The situation in Russia is quite different from that of Argentina. As Enrique Peruzzotti writes, in Argentina

the 2004 elections were characterized by a fragmentation of the political spectrum: there were three competing Peronist tickets and three candidates who, although representing different political parties, shared a common Radical origin. The first electoral round showed a certain parity of forces among the main candidates.

In Russia, the political system was closed to opposition forces. In this context, human rights defenders have had to reconsider their attitude toward politics. After a marked hesitancy about political activism at the end of the Soviet period, some have become increasingly concerned about the regime's evolution. Heated debates have taken place about civic activism and political involvement in Russia today.

In Russia, some civic leaders are interested in devising a political strategy, as opposed to the nonpolitical dissident tradition. "I must confess that in recent times, me and other human rights defenders are tempted to cross the border that separates us from politics. Indeed, leaders of democratic parties have lost all chance of expressing themselves publicly," writes Liudmila Alekseeva from the Moscow Helsinki Committee (*Pravozashchitnoe dvizhenie* 2005:182). The supporters of political involvement consider human rights defenders as an alternative to political parties. As Aleksandr Auzan emphasizes: "We are facing a badly managed democracy [...] That is why civil society is in charge of abnormal functions and missions [...] Political society was destroyed. That is why we now have two missions. I emphasize that it is abnormal. But nobody else can do it" (184). Since December 2003, the question of human rights activists' involvement in political life has been raised frequently. As Dmitrii Kokorev (2007) describes it:

As the elections draw near, independent actors are less and less numerous on the socio-political scene. The registration agency, through the courts, closes down the 'opposition' using the new law on parties. Besides the marginalized political groups, such as the demonstrators in the 'March of Dissent,' the only independent and active actor is the civic sector. We have to walk a fine line between civic activism and politics.

This context can explain the strategy of the Union of Committees of Soldiers' Mothers, which decided to create a political party in 2004. The Popular United Party

5 Interview with an activist of the Moscow Helsinki Group, Moscow, December 11, 2003.

of Soldiers' Mothers was created in order to compensate for the absence of representation of "popular masses" according to the mothers. As they explained, "We, as a civic organization, need political tools to defend our claims." It is worth noting that this party was created by an association with no links to dissidents, one that was less reluctant than former dissidents to become involved in political activities. The Party of Soldiers' Mothers participated in local elections in Moscow in December 2005 alongside the liberal Yabloko party. However, it was unable to take part in legislative elections in 2007 due to new conditions defined by the law.

On the contrary, some civic activists are in favor of an "exit" strategy. During the presidential election of 2004, many activists called for a boycott of the elections. They argued that: "During the campaign to elect the president of the Russian Federation in 2004, the authorities openly acted against the spirit and letter of the law. The country came back under total control, and the opposition was deprived of its possibilities of expression." This text was signed by many activists and some former dissidents (among them Lev Ponomarev, Lev Levinson, and Iurii Samodurov). Facing "elections without choice," many human rights leaders feel that they can do little more than observe the situation (Kokorev 2007).⁶ As an activist from Nizhnii Novgorod explains, "cooperation with political parties during elections is fatal for nonprofit organizations if the party fails, and does not do any good if it succeeds" (Ibid.). This last position recalls the Soviet situation where dissidents denounced the Party and refused all kinds of cooperation with it. In 2007, this situation could have changed with the arrival of new political actors. Mikhail Kas'ianov, a former prime minister under Putin who moved to the opposition, and Gary Kasparov, the chess champion turned politician, proposed to lead the political opposition in Russia, founding the Other Russia movement and organizing protest marches. However, they did not manage to persuade all human rights associations to join them. According to some human rights defenders, Kas'ianov and Kasparov are political adventurers. Civic activists criticized their collaboration with members of the National Bolshevik Party. As Sergei Kovalev explained in 2006, "Honestly, I have no sympathy for many political leaders of the Other Russia movement. I am absolutely convinced that liberals cannot form an alliance with representatives of communist movements" (Kovalev 2006). The Soviet past has caught up with the defenders of human rights in their current political choices.

CONCLUSION

For twenty years, relations between the non-governmental human rights associations and the political parties have evolved considerably. While this evolution has been connected to state policies since the beginning of the 2000s, it is also the result of the choices of associative leaders. During perestroika, the borders between non-governmental associations and parties were blurred. At the beginning of the 1990s, most civil society activists strove to end this confusion and establish clear

6 A poll of one hundred civil society activists showed that 44% were in favor of abandoning politics.

institutional boundaries between associations and political parties. These choices were justified by theories of democratic transition that were very influential in the Russian political context. This was particularly noticeable among former dissidents and new activists in human rights NGOs. The liberal democratic rules, supposing a separation of associative engagement and partisan activism, were reinforced by an aversion to partisan involvement inherited from the Soviet past. Most human rights activists preferred to dedicate themselves to their associations rather than to political action. According to activists' testimonies, associations were places more favorable to preserving the intimate friendship networks developed in the dissident tradition. In contrast, party involvement was considered to give rise to serious tensions amongst activists. Nonetheless, human rights activists did not wish to give up their public influence. They thought their civic position would allow them to exercise civic control over the government. However, after the dissolution of the USSR, human rights activists gradually lost all influence over the political leadership and the administration. In the 1990s, they were powerless in the face of the first Chechen war and the decline of liberal parties. In this period, their associations were institutionalized but they did not succeed in influencing either the government or the population. Hopes for a democratic transition along Latin American lines were progressively abandoned. Since the election of Vladimir Putin in 2000, with the quasi-disappearance of opposition parties, the government has shown a determination to regain control over independent associations. To protest against this state authoritarianism, some activists have been tempted to return to politics. But this seems impossible today in an institutionally closed political system. Activists who want to come back to politics are immediately denounced. The differentiation process between associations and political parties became a widening gap. In June 2009 Dmitrii Medvedev, the Russian president, had a meeting with members of political parties that are not represented in parliament and that complained that human rights practices in Russia are largely chaotic. The president answered: "Nonprofit associations [...] very often deal with political issues; in other words they do what parties should do instead of defending human rights" (Medvedev 2009). Addressing party members, the president said, "And you take over their [nonprofit associations'] functions, which is not right either. You should fight for a place in the political sun. Everything is mixed up there." Twenty years after perestroika, the Russian political leaders still want to draw a clear separation between civil society and political parties. While they make clear references to liberal theory, it is not to allow a pluralistic expression of interests but to weaken cooperation between the civic and political opposition.

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