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### **Christian Fröhlich: Walking the Tightrope. Russian Disability NGOs' Struggle with International and Domestic Demands**

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Christian Fröhlich obtained an MA in sociology and cultural studies at Leipzig University in 2006. He has been a Ph.D. candidate at the Institute for Cultural Studies (Leipzig University) since 2008. The paper presents part of his theoretical framework, which is contrasted and discussed in terms of preliminary findings from his field research.

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## Abstract

Against the background of the rapid change in the Russian social welfare system due to declining financial and structural resources, the paper examines Russian NGOs in the field of disability aid with respect to their international cooperation in order to explain their difficulties in obtaining funding and implementing projects. The discussion encompasses both world polity theory and theoretical arguments on civil society development in post-Soviet states. What are the characteristics of international partnerships with Russian NGOs and what kind of influence is being exerted on the latter's organizational structure and activities?

The paper presents preliminary findings from organizational analysis and interviews with mainly international donor organizations and Russian disability NGOs in three Russian cities: Moscow, St Petersburg and Nizhniy Novgorod. The results show how fragmented the Russian NGO communities are with respect to their access to international funding. The NGOs that already have 'Western' characteristics vis-à-vis organizational and activity structure are best able to benefit from international programmes. But they are also influenced by the even more Western models of human rights advocacy and democracy promotion espoused by their international donors.

The internationally initiated change of activity structure has ruffled the feathers of Russian state officials, who feel defiant towards democracy promotion and human rights advocacy. The state is therefore not about to legitimize the NGOs that accept aid from foreign donors. Accordingly, some NGOs decouple their formal speech and programmes from their actual activities in order to survive.

## 1. Introduction

During the nineteenth century, the perception and institutional treatment of people with disabilities in Russia was transformed. The Tsarist state decided to take responsibility for the mentally ill and physically disabled and at the same time developed a growing urge to exert social and political control over its subjects.<sup>1</sup> As the system of institutions and asylums expanded, medical definitions of disabilities came into force and psychiatric and medical experts gained control over the treatment strategies of corrective medicine.<sup>2</sup>

In the Soviet Union, official ideology painted a picture of a society without problems, i.e. one that was free of abnormalities, impairments or defects.<sup>3</sup> The Soviet system planned to develop wealth in an exemplarily healthy society; all defects therefore had to be eliminated. The official way of dealing people with disabilities was represented by the holistic approach of 'Defectologiya', which defined

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<sup>1</sup> Brown, Julie V.: Societal Responses to Mental Disorder in Prerevolutionary Russia, in: McCagg, William O. / Siegelbaum, Lewis (eds): *The Disabled in the Soviet Union. Past and Present, Theory and Practice*, Pittsburgh/PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1989, pp. 13–37, here p. 33.

<sup>2</sup> Jarovsky, David: *The Stalinist Mentality and the Treatment of Schizophrenia*, in: McCagg, William O. / Siegelbaum, Lewis (eds): *The Disabled in the Soviet Union: Past and Present, Theory and Practice*, Pittsburgh/PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1989, pp. 119–149.

<sup>3</sup> Kruassioukova, Olga: Russian attitudes. Fear, ignorance, misunderstanding and silence, in: *Disability International*, Spring 1996, [www.dpa.org.sg/DPA/publication/dpipub/spring96/dpi7.htm](http://www.dpa.org.sg/DPA/publication/dpipub/spring96/dpi7.htm); Kikkas, Kaido: *Struck Between Communism and Capitalism. The Price of Quick Transition in Estonian Society for People with Disabilities*, in: *Conference proceedings 'Democracy, Diversity and Disability'* at Canadian Centre for Disability Studies, Winnipeg, 2001, pp. 25–32.

'disability' as social misplacement due to physical or psychological impairments.<sup>4</sup> As a consequence, the institutional system was further differentiated to provide the 'right' social environment for impaired individuals who could not actively take part in the erection of Communist society. As second-class citizens, they were systematically segregated and isolated from the main population.<sup>5</sup>

Advocacy groups and nongovernmental representation of disabled people's interests were widely eliminated by Soviet state authorities beginning in the 1950s. Within the dissident movement of the late 1970s and early 1980s, there were some groups that supported physically disabled citizens, e.g. those who had become impaired in occupational accidents. But massive pressure from officials, including verbal and physical attacks on the disabled and forced emigration of handicapped individuals, led to the dissolution of these groups.<sup>6</sup>

Over the course of the social transformations of the 1990s, the Russian social security system faced rapid change due to declining financial and structural resources, and the social situation – especially of handicapped people – became even more precarious. The lack of social welfare distributed by the state, along with the transforming and relatively open political atmosphere, led to an enormous development of nongovernmental organizations (NGO) and grass-roots organizations in the first half of the 1990s to fill the gaps in local health care and social services for people with disabilities.<sup>7</sup>

Although there was little state control, financial support for these organizations was not forthcoming. Searching for funding, the leaders of an emerging Russian nongovernmental sector met with international donors of state agencies or NGOs from mainly Western nations, which were expanding their aid to former states of the Soviet Union as part of globally operating democratization programmes and human rights supporters.

Although the new Russian NGOs benefited from these international support measures in some respects, their contacts to global NGO networks led them to adopt new activities that were no longer concerned with providing social services, but with raising public awareness, policy lobbying and special topics like inclusive education, etc. Paradoxically, instead of continuing to 'help' the state to fulfil social responsibilities, the NGOs found themselves somewhat unwillingly opposing governmental structures and decisions by demanding political and institutional changes. In the current situation of growing state control over social affairs, the legitimization of NGOs and their scope of action have become limited.

This paper is concerned with the question of how Russian NGOs act when they are confronted by both international and domestic demands of legitimization in order to secure their operational resources. The example of disability NGOs is striking because the issue of disability is addressed differently by international donors and domestic political authorities. On the basis of preliminary empirical findings

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<sup>4</sup> Grigorenko, Irina L.: Russian 'Defectology'. Anticipating Perestroika in the field, in: *Journal of Learning Disabilities*, 1998 (Vol. 31), No. 2, pp. 193–207, here p. 194.

<sup>5</sup> Korkunov, Vladimir V. / Nigayev, Alexander S. / Reynolds, Lynne D. / Lerner, Janet W.: Special Education in Russia. History, Reality and Prospects, in: *Journal of Learning Disabilities*, 1998 (Vol. 31), No. 2, pp. 186–192.

<sup>6</sup> The exclusive ideology against disability, segregated custody of disabled people and corresponding normative reactions against them were summed up in a quotation by a Russian official representative during the Moscow Summer Games in 1980 in response to a journalist's question about possible Russian participation in the first Paralympics in England 1982: 'There are no disabled in the Soviet Union.' (vgl. Fefelov, Valerij: *Behinderte in der UdSSR – Ballast für die Gesellschaft: Dokumentation*, Frankfurt/Main: Internationale Gesellschaft für Menschenrechte (IGFM), 1985.)

<sup>7</sup> Holland, Daniel: Grass Roots Promotion of Community Health and Human Rights for People with Disabilities in Post-communist Central Europe. A profile of the Slovak Republic, in: *Disability and Society*, 2003 (Vol. 18), No. 2, pp. 133–143, here pp. 136f.

from interviews with Russian NGO leaders, representatives of international donor organizations and domestic political actors, the paper explores the scope of a paradoxical social field.

## 2. Russian NGOs and international donors

Observers of civil society development in Russia are unsure about the extent of international funding for Russian NGOs: some believe that half or more<sup>8</sup> of all Russian civil society organizations have received resources from international donors while others contend that the figure is actually half or fewer.<sup>9</sup> In any case, international funding played a crucial role in the development of civil society in the early 1990s and often constituted the only source of money and knowledge.<sup>10</sup>

The international discussion about the role of civil society in the democratization process hinges mainly on its ability to influence the consolidation of democracy, as for example when advocacy groups support the rights of certain societal segments. In this model of transition, transnational actors of democracy promotion play a crucial role in enabling civil society.<sup>11</sup> These actors are international donor organizations, foundations and (inter-)governmental development agencies. They pursue internationally represented social norms and therefore act not only as 'norm entrepreneurs'<sup>12</sup> on the global scene, but also as 'moral financiers' by providing resources for national campaigns on socio-political topics.<sup>13</sup>

Without exception, all of the international donor organizations that granted interviews connected their engagement with disability-related projects in Russia with the broader goal of democracy promotion. Organizations like USAID, the Charities Aid Foundation or IREX do not have any special programme streams related to disability aid, but support Russian disability organizations within programmes that strive to empower marginalized social groups or to promote the norms of an open society.

Over the last three decades, the United Nations has adopted a range of norm corpuses addressing the social welfare and social treatment of people with disabilities. These norms can be interpreted as an internationally accepted understanding of what disability is about and how to deal with it on the domestic level.<sup>14</sup> The most recent resolution is the first UN Convention of the new millennium, the 'Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities', which was adopted in December 2006. It took a

<sup>8</sup> Henry, Laura Ann: *Changing Environments. Green Activism, Civil Society, and Political Transformation in Russia*, Berkeley/CA: University of California Press, 2004.

<sup>9</sup> Henderson, Sarah L.: *Building Democracy in Contemporary Russia, Western Support for Grassroots Organizations*, Ithaca/NY: Cornell University Press, 2003, pp. 100; Sperling, Valerie: *Woman's Organizations. Institutionalized Interest Groups or Vulnerable Dissidents?* in: Evans, Alfred B. Jr. / Henry, Laura A. / McIntosh Sundstrom, Lisa (eds): *Russian Civil Society. A Critical Assessment*, Armonk/NY, London: M.E. Sharp, 2006, pp.161–177, here pp. 163–164.

<sup>10</sup> USAID, the MacArthur Foundation, the Soros Foundation and the Ford Foundation – to name just a few.

<sup>11</sup> Carothers, Thomas: *Aiding Democracy Abroad*, Washington D. C.: Carnegie, 1999; Carothers, Thomas: *The End of the Transition Paradigm*, in: *Journal of Democracy*, 2002 (Vol. 13), No. 1, pp. 5–21; Mendelsohn, Sarah E. / Glenn, John K.: *The Power and Limits of NGO. A Critical Look at Building Democracy in Eastern Europe and Eurasia*, New York/NY: Columbia University Press, 2002.

<sup>12</sup> Finnemore, Martha / Sikkink, Kathryn: *International Norm Dynamics and Political Change*, in: *International Organization*, 1998 (Vol. 52), No. 4, pp. 887–917; Risse, Thomas / Sikkink, Kathryn: *The Socialization of International Human Rights Norms into Domestic Practices. Introduction*, in: Risse, Thomas / Roop, Stephen C. / Sikkink, Kathryn (eds): *The Power of Human Rights. International Norms and Domestic Change*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999, pp. 1–38.

<sup>13</sup> McIntosh Sundstrom, Lisa: *Foreign Assistance, International Norms, and NGO Development. Lessons from the Russian Campaign*, in: *International Organization*, 2005 (Vol. 59), Spring, pp. 419–449, here p. 420.

<sup>14</sup> The three main norm corpuses are: the 'World Programme of Action concerning Disabled Persons', adopted in 1982, the 'Standard Rules on the Equalization of Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities', which were adopted in 1993, and the 'Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities', adopted in 2006.

record time of only four years to ratify, and two-thirds of all member states signed it on the first possible day. Although the principles of equal opportunities, participation, social security and inclusion of people with disabilities experience varying degrees of implementation in domestic policies,<sup>15</sup> this convention and its norms enjoy a high level of acceptance on the level of world society.

Highly accepted and legitimated social objectives and aims are carried and spread by social organizations. Sociological Institutionalism explains this with the concept of 'social agency'.<sup>16</sup> Modern social actors, such as states or organizations, advocate on a collective level for the interests and goals of social groups, even if only for abstract principles such as human rights. But these agents are culturally constructed and follow a strongly standardized mode of action, which is mainly rational, universal and abstract. On the global level of world society, the social system of agency constructs its actors as promoters of certain kinds of normative principles, such as individualism, universal fairness, and rational and organized actionability.<sup>17</sup> Theorists call this approach the 'world polity', which conceptualizes the world as being oriented on the cultural principles of modern, Western liberalism.<sup>18</sup> This 'world polity' is a highly legitimized norm corpus that defines who is accepted as an actor on the global scene and who is not.

This produces pressure on international organizations to conform to these principles and modes of action. In the case of democracy promotion, it means that international organizations tend to cooperate only with actors that can be legitimated on the basis of the 'right' (globally accepted) organizational structures, modes of action and pursued goals.

That means that most international donor organizations have a very precise mode of selecting Russian partner organizations. On the one hand, the requirements for the applicants during grant competitions already show a preference for certain kinds of organizations. Past research on international support for Russian NGOs that are concerned with women's and soldiers' rights demonstrates that international donor organizations often want to support only those projects and NGOs representing liberal Western models of democracy and civil society, such as advocacy for individual and human rights, support for social movements and autonomy from the government.<sup>19</sup>

The observations in this study confirm these findings: internationally-funded disability NGOs submit applications for projects, including public awareness campaigns, conferences, workshops, and the production and dissemination of information. Furthermore, analysis of funding structures shows that international donor organizations prefer to cooperate with NGOs whose leaders have attended at least one international exchange programme and already have a 'funding history', i.e. have already received

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<sup>15</sup> Hausotter, Anette: Integration und Inclusion – Europa macht sich auf den Weg. Die Entwicklung integrativer Bildung in den Mitgliedsländern der Europäischen Union, in: Hans, Maren / Ginnold, Antje (eds): Integration von Menschen mit Behinderung – Entwicklungen in Europa, Neuwied: Luchterhand, 2000, pp. 43–83; Maschke, Michael: Behinderung als Feld wohlfahrtsstaatlicher Politik – eine Systematisierung der Behindertenpolitik, in: Berliner Journal für Soziologie, 2004 (Vol. 14), No. 3, pp. 399–420.

<sup>16</sup> Meyer, John W. / Jepperson, Ronald L.: The 'Actors' of Modern Society. The Cultural Construction of Social Agency, in: Sociological Theory, 2000 (Vol. 18), No. 1, pp. 100–120.

<sup>17</sup> Krücken, Georg: Einleitung, in: Meyer, John W.: Weltkultur. Wie die westlichen Prinzipien die Welt durchdringen, Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 2005, pp. 7–16.

<sup>18</sup> Meyer, John W. / Boli, John / Thomas, George M. / Ramirez, Francisco O.: World Society and the Nation State, in: American Journal of Sociology, 1997 (Vol. 103), No. 1, pp. 144–181.

<sup>19</sup> Sundstrom, Lisa: Limits to Global Civil Society. Gaps between Western Donors and Russian NGOs, in: Laxer, Gordon / Halperin, Sandra (eds): Global Civil Society and its Limits, Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2003, pp. 146–165, here p. 150.

international funding in the past. These leaders speak the 'language of the West' and know how to articulate their project aims in the framework of human rights, democratization and advocacy.<sup>20</sup> Russian applicants for international funding not only have to master 'application lyrics', but also need to have excellent English language skills, since the applications have to be submitted in English.

One danger of international funding is that an unequal, vertical relationship between patron and client will evolve.<sup>21</sup> The international donor organization spends huge amounts of money for the measures submitted in the proposals, but then demand a formal project evaluation, accounting information and a final report describing project results that fit into normative frames of the call and thus legitimate the donor organization's mode of action and programme topics vis-à-vis their international money sources.

The results from the interviews conducted with internationally-funded Russian disability NGO representatives show that this funding often requires many organizational resources. But international donors link their funding measures with advanced training in organizational management, fundraising and accounting. Thus they transfer their modes of action, along with the normative paradigms of a rational organizational structure that are legitimized for rational actors on the global level, to Russian NGOs. In the words of world polity theory, international donor organizations thereby construct their partners as rational actors and fulfil their mission as agents of world polity.

But funding alternatives for Russian NGOs are rare because domestic nongovernmental sources are very scarce.<sup>22</sup> Researchers often observe that Russian NGOs tend to change their thematic priorities according to international funding programmes but pay the price of losing contact with their clientele, e.g. when changing their project profile from support for job-searching to public promotion of human rights.<sup>23</sup>

The focus of international donors on already 'Westernized' Russian NGOs and the stringent requirements for application and project realization preclude other Russian NGOs from obtaining funding. The latter group includes disability organizations that are primarily concerned with providing social and medical services on a very local level due to the lack of state provision. The disability NGOs in the sample of this study that received little or no funding from international donors show a much higher level of basic charity and service provision activity than their foreign-funded counterparts.<sup>24</sup> Non-internationally-funded organizations have direct contact with their clientele when they e.g. help them with job-seeking or argue with local authorities for accessible buses and depressed kerbs. These NGOs also realize cultural and recreational projects by arranging excursions, sports competitions and collective meals and festivities. Their self-perception and normative framing is not embedded in human rights

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<sup>20</sup> Henderson, Sarah L.: *Selling Civil Society. Western Aid und the Nongovernmental Organization Sector in Russia*, in: *Comparative Political Studies*, 2002 (Vol. 35), No. 2, pp. 139–167, here p. 156.

<sup>21</sup> Sarah Henderson describes this as 'principled clientelism'. (Henderson, Sarah L.: *Selling Civil Society. Western Aid and the Nongovernmental Organization Sector in Russia*, in: *Comparative Political Studies*, 2002 [Vol. 35], No. 2, pp. 139–167, here p. 162.)

<sup>22</sup> Diamond, Larry Jay: *Developing Democracy. Toward Consolidation*, Baltimore/MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999, here pp. 252–254.

<sup>23</sup> McIntosh Sundstrom, Lisa / Henry, Laura A.: *Russian Civil Society. Tensions and Trajectories*, in: Evans, Alfred B. Jr. / Henry, Laura A. / McIntosh Sundstrom, Lisa (eds): *Russian Civil Society. A Critical Assessment*, Armonk/NY, London: M.E. Sharp, 2006, pp. 305–322, here pp. 312–314.

<sup>24</sup> These findings agree with results from other studies on Russian civil society: Henderson, Sarah L.: *Building Democracy in Contemporary Russia, Western Support for Grassroots Organizations*, Ithaca/NY: Cornell University Press, 2003, here pp. 111–113; Hemment, Julie: *The Riddle of the Third Sector*, in: *Anthropological Quarterly*, 2004 (Vol. 77), No. 2, pp. 215–242, here pp. 234–235.

discourse or opposition to the state authority's status quo; they instead see themselves as partners with the government in solving urgent socio-economic problems.

Furthermore, the risk of cleavage in the Russian NGO community through international funding is enforced by the differentiation of spatial opportunity structures. The biggest as well as the most disability NGOs are concentrated in major cities (Moscow, St Petersburg), where the offices of all the international donors are also located. Therefore, informal communication between members of donor organizations and Russian disability activists is an important condition for further cooperation.<sup>25</sup> In the conducted interviews, most international donors showed awareness of this issue. They are trying to expand their activities to the Russian regions, but struggle with communication and knowledge barriers. Recently, they have been encouraging NGOs from big cities to build regional networks.

Unfortunately, international funding runs the risk of establishing activist elites rather than supporting horizontal connections between NGOs. The competition for international grants often leads Russian NGOs to begin searching for their niche.<sup>26</sup> The example of disability NGOs shows that some organizations decide against applying for international grants because they do not want to change their project aims or because they anticipate a preference for certain well-established NGOs among international donors.

### 3. Russian NGOs and political culture

International assistance and funding for NGO development do not occur in a vacuum, but in a political environment in which NGOs are embedded and restrained in their activities. Scholars point out political barriers against democratic reforms which take the form of bureaucratic obstacles and political harassment of activists.<sup>27</sup> Others argue that the political system and governmental structures set specific barriers for NGO activities by delegitimizing certain normative modes of actions.<sup>28</sup>

In Russia, two characteristics of the political environment for NGOs need to be emphasized: a) the entanglement of the government and NGOs and b) the government's tendency to interpret NGO activities as oppositional and as offences against the state. These factors negatively affect the efficiency of international funding.

#### a) Entanglement of the government and NGOs

It is often discussed whether and how the state should be involved in civil society and NGO development and at what point the autonomy of NGOs is compromised by a relationship with state authorities.<sup>29</sup> On the one side, coherent governance could be fruitful for civil society by implementing laws and setting up

<sup>25</sup> Henderson, Sarah L.: Selling Civil Society. Western Aid und the Nongovernmental Organization Sector in Russia, in: Comparative Political Studies, 2002 (Vol. 35), No. 2, pp. 139–167, here p. 157.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., here p. 159.

<sup>27</sup> Mendelssohn, Sarah E.: Democracy Assistance and Political Transition in Russia. Between Success and Failure, in: International Security, 2001 (Vol. 25), No. 4, pp. 68–106.

<sup>28</sup> Schmitz, Hans Peter / Sikkink, Kathryn: International Human Rights, in: Carlsnaes, Walter / Risse, Thomas / Simmons, Beth A. (eds): Handbook of International Relations, London: Sage, 2002, pp. 517–537, here p. 523.

<sup>29</sup> Hale, Henry E.: Civil Society from Above? Statist and Liberal Models of State-Building in Russia, in: Demokratizatsiia, 2002 (Vol. 10), No. 3, pp. 306–321; McMann, Kelly M.: The Civic Realm of Kyrgyzstan. Soviet Economic Legacies and Activist's Expectations, in: Jones Luong, Pauline (eds): The Transformation of States and Societies in Central Asia, Ithaca/NY, London: Cornell University Press, 2003, pp. 213–245, here p. 242.

legal conditions for NGO activities, as can be seen in Western liberal and democratic states. But on the other side, government involvement could be dangerous in post-Communist states with authoritarian histories.<sup>30</sup> The tradition of 'gosudarstvennost' ('loyalty to the state') shaped the state-civil society relationship even before the Soviet Union and is being revitalized under the Putin administration<sup>31</sup>. This tendency is often perceived as dangerous for civil society development because it leads to a 'quasi-civil society' comprised of a network of technically nongovernmental organizations that continuously support governmentally-defined issues.<sup>32</sup>

An example of such a network in the field of support for disabled people is the nationwide network of the three biggest organizations: the All-Russian Society of the Disabled, the All-Russian Society of the Blind and the All-Russian Society of the Deaf. Founded and developed due to state initiatives in the 1930s (for the blind and deaf) and in the 1980s (for the disabled), they have thus far been closely connected with governmental structures. All three organizations receive continuous funding from state budgets and initiate and support government campaigns to aid disabled people. It is important to mention that none of them focuses on human rights or democratization issues; they all exclusively offer social services and sheltered workplaces for people with disabilities in almost all of the Russian regions, which means that they are an important social welfare institution in Russia.

But not only organizations founded during the Soviet era are closely connected with government structures. Most of the existing Russian disabilities NGOs were set up in the late 1980s or in the first half of the 1990s. Most of the interviewed activists began their engagement back then in informal self-help groups and grass-roots organizations. Those developments were triggered by the state's failure to provide social welfare services during the 1990s, which led to cooperation between the state and NGOs.<sup>33</sup> The tense relations with governmental structures also facilitated the consolidation of NGOs due to state provision of material resources like accommodations and equipment.<sup>34</sup>

Against that background of historically well-established state-NGO connections based on the Soviet legacy of social action (which traditionally involves the incorporation of public organizations into governmental structures),<sup>35</sup> totally independent NGOs have grappled with severe delegitimation and public mistrust since the 1990s.<sup>36</sup> The charity and nongovernmental welfare sectors were discredited by

<sup>30</sup> Diamond, Larry Jay: *Developing Democracy: Toward Consolidation*, Baltimore/MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999, here pp. 250–260; Fish, Steven M.: *Russia's Fourth Transition*, in: Diamond, Larry Jay / Plattner, Marc F.: *The Global Resurgence of Democracy*, 1996, pp. 264–275, here pp. 272–273.

<sup>31</sup> McIntosh Sundstrom, Lisa / Henry, Laura A.: *Russian Civil Society. Tensions and Trajectories*, in: Evans, Alfred B. Jr. / Henry, Laura A. / McIntosh Sundstrom, Lisa (eds): *Russian Civil Society. A Critical Assessment*, Armonk/NY, London: M.E. Sharp, 2006, pp. 305–322, here p. 316.

<sup>32</sup> Evans, Alfred B. Jr.: *Vladimir Putin's Design for Civil Society*, in: Evans, Alfred B. Jr. / Henry, Laura A. / McIntosh Sundstrom, Lisa (eds): *Russian Civil Society. A Critical Assessment*, Armonk/NY, London: M.E. Sharp, 2006, pp. 147–158, here p. 152; Hale, Henry E.: *Civil Society from Above? Statist and Liberal Models of State-Building in Russia*, in: *Demokratizatsiia*, 2002 (Vol. 10), No. 3, pp. 306–321, here p. 310, 314–319; Squier, John: *Civil Society and the Challenge of Russian Gosudarstvennost*, in: *Demokratizatsiia*, 2002 (Vol. 10), No. 2, pp. 166–183. An example of tense state-civil society entanglement is the formation of so-called 'government organized nongovernmental organizations' (GONGOs).

<sup>33</sup> Salamon, Lester M. / Anheiner, Helmut K.: *Social Origins of Civil Society. Explaining the Nonprofit Sector Cross-Nationally*, in: *Voluntas*, 1998 (Vol. 9), No. 3, pp. 213–148.

<sup>34</sup> Thomson, Kate: *Disability Organizations in the Regions*, in: Evans, Alfred B. Jr. / Henry, Laura A. / McIntosh Sundstrom, Lisa (eds): *Russian Civil Society. A Critical Assessment*, Armonk/NY, London: M.E. Sharp, 2006, pp. 229–245, here p. 230.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, here p. 242.

<sup>36</sup> Evans, Alfred B. Jr.: *Vladimir Putin's Design for Civil Society*, in: Evans, Alfred B. Jr. / Henry, Laura A. / McIntosh Sundstrom, Lisa (eds): *Russian Civil Society. A Critical Assessment*, Armonk/NY, London: M.E. Sharp, 2006, pp. 147–158, here p. 147.



wide-scale corruption within the NGO sector that allowed NGO-state collaborations to appear more confidential for donations from the Russian public sphere.<sup>37</sup> But their involvement with government-supported basic charities prevents Russian NGOs from engaging in human rights activities or lobbying for political change that questions the status quo.<sup>38</sup> And that is one of the main reasons why many disability NGOs are virtually invisible to international donor organizations.

#### b) State interpretation of NGO activities as oppositional

The activities of Russian disability NGOs – even if they are focused on social services – imply a human rights approach that seeks to change the material basis of social structures in order to decrease and abolish social exclusion of people with disabilities. International organizations support a more radical version of this approach since they want to accelerate the ‘politics of difference’, which fights structural inequality by articulating new and positive identities of hidden and stigmatized social groups.<sup>39</sup> But due to certain characteristics of Russian political culture that go beyond the entanglement of NGOs and governmental structures, disability organizations face difficulties in adopting this ‘Western’ political and analytical approach.<sup>40</sup>

The Putin Administration discredits Russian civil society organizations receiving grants and other resources from international donors or private foundations as state-decomposing entities. Internationally-funded organizations or activists who advocate for human rights are often interpreted as questioning the status quo of the government. When they for example push for more self-determination and political and social participation for people with disabilities, they risk being labelled as dissidents and being marginalized and oppressed by state authorities.<sup>41</sup>

These patterns came to light in the conducted interviews. On the one hand, a member of Russian Parliament (DUMA) voiced his fear that international organizations could erode Russian society by funding and supporting activities. On the other hand, representatives of Russian disability NGOs justify their project focus on social and cultural activities on their fear of being labelled as dissidents and of subsequently facing oppression.

The Russian state authorities’ resentment of NGOs is rooted in the historical and cultural conservation of governmental practices of intolerance towards independent social actors.<sup>42</sup> Thus, as the conducted interviews show, Russian NGOs have the widest space for their activities when they keep close ties to state officials, which might even entail including them in their projects. Disability NGOs that are too

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<sup>37</sup> Thomson, Kate: Disability Organizations in the Regions, in: Evans, Alfred B. Jr. / Henry, Laura A. / McIntosh Sundstrom, Lisa (eds): *Russian Civil Society. A Critical Assessment*, Armonk/NY, London: M.E. Sharp, 2006, pp. 229–245, here pp. 236–238.

<sup>38</sup> Richter, James: Promoting Civil Society? Democracy Assistance and Russian Women's Organizations, in: *Problems of Post-Communism*, 2002 (Vol. 49), No. 1, pp. 30–41, here p. 40.

<sup>39</sup> Young, Iris M.: *Inclusion and Democracy*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002, pp. 81–120.

<sup>40</sup> Thomson, Kate: Disability Organizations in the Regions, in: Evans, Alfred B. Jr. / Henry, Laura A. / McIntosh Sundstrom, Lisa (eds): *Russian Civil Society. A Critical Assessment*, Armonk/NY, London: M.E. Sharp, 2006, pp. 229–245, here p. 231.

<sup>41</sup> Evans, Alfred B. Jr.: Vladimir Putin's Design for Civil Society, in: Evans, Alfred B. Jr. / Henry, Laura A. / McIntosh Sundstrom, Lisa (eds): *Russian Civil Society. A Critical Assessment*, Armonk/NY, London: M.E. Sharp, 2006, pp. 147–158; here pp. 149f.

<sup>42</sup> McIntosh Sundstrom, Lisa / Henry, Laura A.: Russian Civil Society. Tensions and Trajectories, in: Evans, Alfred B. Jr. / Henry, Laura A. / McIntosh Sundstrom, Lisa (eds): *Russian Civil Society. A Critical Assessment*, Armonk/NY, London: M.E. Sharp, 2006, pp. 305–322, here p. 306.

enmeshed with governmental structures to receive international support appear to have the most possibilities to influence state policies and social welfare structures.<sup>43</sup>

#### 4. Conclusion

It cannot be denied that the activities of international donor organizations have had very positive effects on the development of nongovernmental support and advocacy for the problems and needs of people with disabilities. Due to their funding and knowledge transfer, Russian NGOs are able to address the various concerns of the disabled in Russia and develop a wide range of supporting activities. The adoption of 'Western' human rights approaches, with emphasis on the principles of equal opportunities, participation, social security and inclusion of people with disabilities, changes their scope of activities from providing social services to struggling with discrimination and increasing public awareness. Furthermore, the cooperation of Russian NGOs with international organizations causes a transfer of 'Western' patterns of organizational structures and modes of action. Management systems, development strategies, and controlling and accounting structures have become increasingly common in Russian NGOs over the course of their funding histories.

But these developments are selective because of specificities of international funding strategies and grant applications. This leads to the division of Russian disability organizations into those that do and do not cooperate internationally. Both groups implement different modes of action and approaches to disability, which means that a 'world polity of disability' can only be established in the Russian context to some extent.

Internationally-funded Russian NGOs have to struggle with a 'hostile' political environment (on both the local and federal levels). This forces them to engage in a 'local decoupling' of language and action<sup>44</sup>: although they use the Western language of human rights in project proposals and final reports when applying and accounting for international grants, Russian NGOs keep their actions and communications towards state officials within the traditional parameters of the state-NGO relationship, which is essentially a social service partnership.<sup>45</sup> The most successful NGOs in the study sample constantly try to strike a balance between realizing human rights projects with international grants while at the same time continuing to provide social services.

However, international influence on the Russian NGOs' modes of action in terms of advocacy for human rights often opposes the state's positions on that topic and thus faces cultural limits. Past research has shown that successful project implementation partly depends on cooperation between governmental structures and political activists. On the other hand, it is important to appeal to universal and culturally accepted norms (like e.g. physical integrity) and to only later connect them to human rights topics and calls for political change. In Russia, the discussion on human rights does not receive the same response as in Western societies, where the principles of individual rights and liberty are taken more seriously.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> See also: *Ibid.*, here p. 317.

<sup>44</sup> Meyer, John W. / Rowan, Brian: Institutionalized Organizations. Formal Structures as Myth and Ceremony, in: *American Journal of Sociology*, 1977 (Vol. 83), No. 2, pp. 340–363.

<sup>45</sup> See also: Sundstrom, Lisa: Limits to Global Civil Society. Gaps between Western Donors and Russian NGOs, in: Laxer, Gordon / Halperin, Sandra (eds): *Global Civil Society and its Limits*, Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2003, pp. 146–165, here p. 159ff.

<sup>46</sup> McIntosh Sundstrom, Lisa, 2006: *Soldier's Rights Groups in Russia*, pp. 179–192: shows that with the example of soldiers' mothers' groups.

For disability NGOs, it is thus problematic to employ a human-rights-based approach to disability in a political and cultural context that is so different from their original background.<sup>47</sup> International donor organizations have to take this conundrum into account when determining their funding aims and practices.

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<sup>47</sup> Thomson, Kate: Disability Organizations in the Regions, in: Evans, Alfred B. Jr. / Henry, Laura A. / McIntosh Sundstrom, Lisa (eds): *Russian Civil Society. A Critical Assessment*, Armonk/NY, London: M.E. Sharp, 2006, pp. 229–245, here p. 240; see also: Stone, Emma: *From the Research Notes of a Foreign Devil. Disability Research in China*, in: Barnes, Colin / Mercer, Geof (eds): *Doing Disability Research*, Leeds: The Disability Press, 1997, pp. 207–226.