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**Striving for social change.  
NGOs in the field of HIV/AIDS,  
drug policy and human rights in the Russian Federation.**

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## Abstract

What is the state of civil society in present-day Russia? In order to find answers to this question, the article proposes to study civic engagement on social issues. In the context of a collapsing social system, many Russian citizens have organized themselves around issues that directly affect them. The objective of the article is to find out how social NGOs have responded to citizens' needs and to what extent they have been able to contribute to social change and civil society development in Russia.

Sidney Tarrow's political opportunity structure provides a useful framework for analysing the political context of civil society in Russia. Based on this framework, the article will examine both the conditions and the influence strategies of the NGOs. It will thereby draw upon three examples of NGO engagement in Russia: 1) the *Union of the Committees of Soldiers' Mothers*, 2) the *Russian Harm Reduction Network* and 3) the *Russian Association of People Living with HIV*.

The article argues that although striving for social change, the NGOs in question have little access to decision-making processes and therefore exert only limited influence on social policy-making in Russia. The growing concern about social problems from the side of the political elite, however, might lead to more opportunities in the future.

## 1. Introduction

The issue of civil society development in post-Communist transition countries has generated great interest over the past two decades. Within international democracy promotion, the concept of 'civil society', commonly understood as a precondition for democracy, has taken centre stage. Western donor agencies have thus developed a great variety of programmes to assist civil society development. From today's perspective, however, the outcomes of external democracy promotion can be regarded as meagre, as they have not succeeded in rooting the new ideas in society.

This particularly holds true for Russia, where civic engagement and the development of a participatory political culture can still be regarded as weak. In addition, the state increasingly constrains public space, thereby hampering the development of an active NGO sector. It would, however, be wrong to conclude that there is no civil society in present-day Russia. Many citizens have organized themselves around issues that directly affect them or their family members. In the context of a collapsing social system, they have taken matters into their own hands by creating organizations that respond to concrete needs. In many fields of social policy, e.g. in response to the HIV/AIDS epidemic, Russian NGOs have become key actors and are today more and more accepted as partners of state institutions.

This paper will analyse the role of NGOs in the development of civil society in Russia. It will thereby focus on three NGOs that are active in the field of HIV/AIDS, drug policy and human rights protection. The paper aims to contribute to our understanding of how NGOs respond to social needs and to what extent they have been able to contribute to social change and civil society development in Russia. Special attention will be paid to the political context of NGOs and their strategies to exert influence on domestic policy-making.

The outline of the paper is the following: After elaborating a working definition for civil society and conceptualizing its relation to the state, I will outline the development of civil society in post-Soviet Russia before turning to the key question, which is the interrelation between NGOs and the state. Examining

three particular NGOs, I will focus on the strategies they use in order to create opportunities for social change. The information about these strategies is partly based on interviews with NGO representatives. Finally, I will draw conclusions from the discussed cases of NGO engagement.

## 2. Civil society, NGOs and the state

The first step of the investigation is to elaborate a working definition of civil society and conceptualize its relation to the state. Over the past two decades, the concept of 'civil society' has gained great popularity, both among scholars and policy-makers. According to Gellner, 'civil society' can be defined as 'the space between the state, the market and the family.'<sup>1</sup> As an arena of societal debate and interaction, the term 'civil society' not only refers to organizations, but also encompasses civic principles and values, civic culture and forms of collective action within society. The core of its definition lies in providing an 'arena of uncoerced collective action around shared interests, purposes and values.'<sup>2</sup>

NGOs on their part can be understood as key actors in civil society. Despite their diversity, NGOs share common characteristics. According to the *Johns Hopkins Comparative Nonprofit Sector Project*, NGOs are both non-governmental and non-profit, meaning that they are independent from state structures and do not distribute profits among their members.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, NGOs possess an organizational structure, are self-governing and voluntary in their membership.<sup>4</sup>

The interaction between NGOs and the state is complex and reciprocal. The state shapes the conditions for civil society development by providing legislation and offering modes of societal participation in decision-making processes. State treatment of civil society can range from hostile to benevolent and actively supportive.<sup>5</sup> NGOs in turn have a transformative potential vis-à-vis the state. As service providers they can raise resources for enhancing and reforming public services. Furthermore, they can exert influence on government policies by articulating collective interests and holding political authorities accountable. In their relation to the state, NGOs can be complementing, reforming and/or opposing.<sup>6</sup>

## 3. Civil society development in post-Soviet Russia

During the Soviet era civil society was largely dominated by the state. So-called 'public associations' (*obshchestvennyye organizatsii*) were controlled by the party system and highly restricted in their ability to articulate the interests of their constituencies.<sup>7</sup> The dissident movement, which emerged in the 1960s, was small and remained isolated from mainstream society.<sup>8</sup> This changed with the reform process of

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<sup>1</sup> Gellner, Ernest: *Conditions of Liberty. Civil Society and its Rivals*, London: Hamish Hamilton, 1994.

<sup>2</sup> Centre for Civil Society: *What is Civil Society?*, in: LSE Centre for Civil Society, [http://www.lse.ac.uk/collections/CCS/what\\_is\\_civil\\_society.htm](http://www.lse.ac.uk/collections/CCS/what_is_civil_society.htm), accessed 20 May 2009.

<sup>3</sup> Salamon, Lester M. / Sokolowski, Wojciech / List, Regina: *Global Civil Society. An Overview*, Baltimore/MD: The Johns Hopkins University, 2003, pp. 7–8.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Lillehammer, Giske C.: *State-NGO Relationships in Transitional Democracies. The case of CPA-ONG – a Government Centre for the Advancement of NGOs in Benin*, UNDP, 2003.

<sup>6</sup> Clark, John: *Democratizing Development. The Role of Voluntary Organizations*, London: Earthscan Publications, 1991.

<sup>7</sup> Evans, Alfred B.: *Civil Society in the Soviet Union?*, in: Evans, Alfred B. / Herry, Laura A. / Sundstrom, Lisa McIntosh (eds): *Russian Civil Society. A Critical Assessment*, New York/NY: Shape, 2006, pp. 28-54, here p. 47.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., here p. 43.

*perestroika*, which opened new political opportunities for the formation of civil society.<sup>9</sup> The late 1980s saw the rise of a great variety of informal groups (*neformalye*), whose activities ranged from student clubs to cultural associations and political movements.<sup>10</sup> Through societal mobilization, those informal citizens' associations played a role in the process of regime change.<sup>11</sup>

After the end of the Soviet Union, Russian civil society went through a process of institutionalization and organizational development. NGOs were granted legal status and received substantial funding from Western donors, which aimed at promoting democracy through civil society support, thereby subscribing to the rationale that a strong civil society is indispensable for democratization. Some scholars, however, argue that external efforts to strengthen civil society produced ambivalent results: Although funding allowed NGOs to develop organizational capacity, they became increasingly detached from their constituencies, engaged in competition among themselves and followed donors' agendas rather than responding to local needs.<sup>12</sup>

Since the beginning of the Putin presidency in the year 2000, a new development in the relationship between state and civil society has taken shape. In addition to constricting civil liberties, such as freedom of speech and freedom of association, the Putin government has strengthened its control over the non-governmental sector.<sup>13</sup> Negative media reports have associated foreign-funded NGOs with anti-Russian espionage, and, according to Andrey Makarychev, have become a powerful means of delegitimizing the civil society sector.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, the new NGO law, adopted in 2006, expanded the supervisory powers of the state over foreign and domestic NGOs by tightening the regulations for registration and introducing new reporting requirements.<sup>15</sup> The law stipulates that an organization can be denied registration if its 'goals and objectives contradict the Constitution and laws of the Russian Federation; or create a threat to the sovereignty, political independence, territorial integrity, national unity, unique character, cultural heritage and national interests of the Russian Federation.'<sup>16</sup> The ambiguity of this provision allows for arbitrary interpretations and gives authorities leeway to determine whether the activities of a specific organization correspond to the national interests of Russia. The new regulations have resulted in a decrease in the number of NGOs since 2006, and have hence been characterized as an 'effective cleansing' of the civil society sector.<sup>17</sup> In some cases the close-down of organizations was directly linked to their activities and politically motivated. An ex-

<sup>9</sup> Tarrow, Sidney: *Power in Movement. Social Movements and Contentious Politics*, 2nd edn, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998, p. 75.

<sup>10</sup> Berezovsky, V. N. / Krotov, N. I.: *Neformal'naia Rossiia. O neformal'nykh politizirovannykh dvizheniiakh i gruppakh v RSFSR*, Moscow: Molodaia Gvardiia, 1990.

<sup>11</sup> Tarrow, Sidney: *Power in Movement. Social Movements and Contentious Politics*, 2nd edn, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998, p. 75.

<sup>12</sup> Henderson, Sarah H.: *Selling Civil Society. Western Aid and the Nongovernmental Organisation Sector in Russia*, in: *Comparative Political Studies*, 2002 (Vol. 35), No. 2, pp. 139–166, here pp. 142–143.

<sup>13</sup> Fish, Steven M.: *Democracy Derailed in Russia. The Failure of Open Politics*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005, here pp. 67–77.

<sup>14</sup> Makarychev, Andrey S.: *Politics, the State, and De-Politicization. Putin Project Reassessed*, in: *Problems of Post-Communism*, 2008 (Vol. 55), No. 5, pp. 62–71, here p. 63.

<sup>15</sup> The International Center for Not-for-Profit Law: *Analysis of Law No. 18-FZ. On Introducing Amendments to Certain Legislative Acts of the Russian Federation*, 17 February 2006, [www.icnl.org/KNOWLEDGE/news/2006/01-19\\_Russia\\_NGO\\_Law\\_Analysis.pdf](http://www.icnl.org/KNOWLEDGE/news/2006/01-19_Russia_NGO_Law_Analysis.pdf)

<sup>16</sup> Federal Law, No. 18-FZ of 10 January 2006 on Introducing Amendments to Certain Legislative Acts of the Russian Federation, in: *Rossiyskaia Gazeta*, <http://www.rg.ru/2006/01/17/nko-poryadok-dok.html>

<sup>17</sup> Interview with NGO representative, St. Petersburg, 30 September 2008.

ample is the *Russian-Chechen Friendship Society*, a human rights organization that was denied registration in October 2006.<sup>18</sup> In the majority of cases, however, the close-downs affected organizations that had been inactive or lacked the capacity to comply with the new rules.<sup>19</sup>

Parallel to this development, the Russian government increased opportunities for NGOs to obtain state funding. It also introduced new institutions to strengthen the dialogue with civil society, as for instance the *Public Chamber*, assigned to provide 'interaction between citizens, public associations and the federal government.'<sup>20</sup> On the local level, programmes allowing the participation of NGOs were introduced. Other forms of state funding include government-funded grant competitions. Additionally, local and regional governments have engaged NGOs in dialogue through consultative mechanisms, as for instance round tables or coordination councils.<sup>21</sup>

On the whole, it seems that the Russian government is seeking to divide the 'good' NGOs from the 'bad' NGOs. According to Makarychev, the Kremlin wants NGOs to stay out of politics and thus actively prevents them from exerting political influence.<sup>22</sup> Its policy is aimed at controlling civil society by restricting the activities of independent, potentially critical NGOs, while at the same time building a pool of loyal organizations that help with the implementation of state programmes.

#### 4. Conditions for civil society development in contemporary Russia

The conditions for civil society development in today's Russia are challenging, with many NGOs facing an unfavourable working environment. Despite the difficult political context, civic activity is on the rise, particularly in the field of social welfare. In the Russian NGO sector, many organizations evolve from social initiatives or self-help groups; about 30% of the NGOs deal with social issues.<sup>23</sup> Due to the deteriorating welfare system in post-Soviet Russia, where many social services were no longer available, citizens were forced to create organizations for mutual aid and support. Many of those organizations were built upon existing social networks, such as families or friends. An example is the many 'mothers' organizations' founded by women as a response to the needs of their immediate environment. The functions of those NGOs range from mutual aid to advocacy for social rights. An important element of their activities is direct services, including programmes and consultations.<sup>24</sup> Organizations often assist their members or clients on an individual basis by helping them to solve every-day problems and assert their rights vis-à-vis bureaucratic state services. Some organizations strive to combine service delivery with advocacy. They cite individual cases in their dialogue with state institutions in order to furnish evidence

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<sup>18</sup> Human Rights Watch: Russia. Court Orders Closure of Russian-Chechen Friendship Society, 12 October 2006, <http://www.hrw.org/en/news/2006/10/12/russia-court-orders-closure-russian-chechen-friendship-society>

<sup>19</sup> USAID: The NGO Sustainability Index, Washington D. C.: USAID, 2007, here p. 195, [http://www.usaid.gov/locations/europe\\_eurasia/dem\\_gov/ngoindex/2007/](http://www.usaid.gov/locations/europe_eurasia/dem_gov/ngoindex/2007/)

<sup>20</sup> Public Chamber of the Russian Federation: Federal Law, No. 32-FZ of 4 April 2005 on the Public Chamber of the Russian Federation, <http://www.oprf.ru/about/law/418/>

<sup>21</sup> Cook, Linda / Vinogradova, Elena: NGOs and Social Policy-Making in Russia's Regions, in: Problems of Post-Communism, 2006 (Vol. 53), No. 5, pp. 28–41, here p. 30.

<sup>22</sup> Makarychev, Andrey S.: Politics, the State, and De-Politicization. Putin Project Reassessed, in: Problems of Post-Communism, 2008 (Vol. 55), No. 5, pp. 62–71, here p. 63–64.

<sup>23</sup> Cook, Linda J. / Vinogradova, Elena: NGOs and Social Policy Making in Russia's Regions, in: Problems of Post-Communism, 2006 (Vol. 53), No 5, pp. 28–41, here p. 28.

<sup>24</sup> Interview NGO representative, Kaliningrad, 14 October 2008.

about the problems their clients experience when trying to obtain public services.<sup>25</sup> The organizations thereby seek to draw attention to shortcomings in public policy and formulate proposals for improvement.<sup>26</sup>

A useful characterization of social-sector NGOs can be found in the work of Linda Cook and Elena Vinogradova, who have studied the activities, character and influence of social-sector NGOs in Russia's regions.<sup>27</sup> Cook and Vinogradova distinguish between grass-roots NGOs, addressing the needs of a special social group, and policy/advocacy NGOs, which are directed to the formulation and implementation of policy.<sup>28</sup> The authors argue that NGOs differ a great deal in their behaviour towards government and society. Whereas some NGOs, reminiscent of Soviet-era organizations, confine themselves to implementing services and are in fact managed by regional authorities, others have a political voice and try to engage in social policy-making, but nevertheless are too weak to make real changes.<sup>29</sup> Unlike other studies that solely addressed the activities and roles of civil society organizations, Cook and Vinogradova explicitly focus on the behaviour of NGOs, which allows them to evaluate the transformative potential of different types of organizations. In the following this study will be used as a starting point for studying NGO strategies, which I define as behaviour aimed at gaining influence.

A relevant theoretical framework for the analysis of the relationship between the state and civil society can be found in Sidney Tarrow's concept of political opportunity structures, which evolved from the study of social movements.<sup>30</sup> Tarrow's analytical framework can be applied to the given context in order to analyse the conditions and strategies of Russian NGOs vis-à-vis state authorities. Political opportunities and constraints, according to Tarrow, can be defined as 'dimensions of the political environment that provide incentives for collective action by affecting people's expectations for success or failure.'<sup>31</sup> The political context thus shapes the NGOs' conditions. Opportunities for NGOs include expanding access to decision-making processes, shifting alignments in the power structures, taking advantage of the division of elites and seeking out influential allies.<sup>32</sup> Repression, on the other hand, can be understood as a means 'to depress collective action and raise the costs for organising and mobilising opinion.'<sup>33</sup> While direct suppression might be more visible and frightening, Tarrow argues that increasing the costs for organizations can be regarded as an even more effective strategy in the long run.<sup>34</sup> The case of Russian civil society provides a good example. By exerting bureaucratic pressure and creating legal insecurity via ambiguous, often contradictory rules, the government seldom has to officially ban inconvenient organizations; NGOs are indirectly forced out of existence due to a lack of resources. The Russian state thus effectively frustrates NGO development and suppresses independent voices from civil society.

Still, political opportunities and constraints are not static, but change over time. Societal actors have a chance, however limited, to employ strategies that allow them to open up opportunities and channel

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Cook, Linda J. / Vinogradova, Elena: NGOs and Social Policy Making in Russia's Regions, in: *Problems of Post-Communism*, 2006 (Vol. 53), No 5, pp. 28–41.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., here p. 31.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., here p. 38.

<sup>30</sup> Tarrow, Sidney. *Power in Movement. Social Movements and Contentious Politics*, 2nd edn, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., here pp. 76–77.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., here pp. 77–80.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., here p. 83.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., here p. 83.

their claims. What does this mean for NGOs in the Russian context? According to Tarrow, the key to opening political opportunities is expanding access. Regarding the social sector in Russia, the political elite are apparently becoming increasingly aware of social problems. Alarmed by a worrying demographic downturn, Russian politicians are now more willing to put social issues on the agenda that had previously been treated as low priority. In 2006, President Putin officially declared HIV/AIDS to be a national security threat and called for a scaled-up response to the epidemic. Russia's new National Security Strategy, approved in May 2009, also identifies HIV-infection and other health problems as factors that increase mortality and thus endanger Russia's national security.<sup>35</sup> Although this new threat perception obviously does not instantly translate into a better social policy or more civil society participation, it nevertheless opens up opportunities for NGOs to formulate interests and advocate for change. The Russian health care system is in dire need of reform. State institutions are therefore inclined to accept NGOs as partners and work towards improving public policy. In this respect, one can argue that relations between the state and society have significantly changed since the end of the Soviet era. Despite a growing tendency to assert control, the political elite cannot fully close its eyes to the nation's alarming social problems. To a certain degree it needs civil society to respond to the problems. This enables NGOs to gain space for themselves and play a role in the formulation and implementation of policy.

## 5. NGOs in focus

In the political context, NGOs can use different strategies in order to voice their claims and achieve change. In the analysis of those influence strategies, the focus will be on three Russian NGOs that are active in the field of HIV/AIDS, drug policy and human rights protection: 1) the *Union of the Committees of Soldiers' Mothers in Russia*, 2) the *Russian Harm Reduction Network* and 3) the *Russian Association of People Living with HIV*.

Despite their different objectives and fields of activity, the three organizations have a number of common characteristics. First of all, they are network organizations with a strong local basis. They emerged from grass-roots initiatives that were established to represent the interests of particular social groups, such as people living with HIV, drug users and conscripts or soldiers of the Russian military. The above-mentioned NGOs, however, do not limit themselves to providing mutual aid, but also strive to defend the rights and interests of their members/clients and participate in political processes to improve policy. In their daily work, the three NGOs combine delivery of services on a case-by-case basis with advocacy. They thus serve as salient examples of civic engagement on social issues.

What can NGOs do in order to expand their opportunities? Based on Tarrow's framework, three different strategies can be identified. First, NGOs can find political allies that are prepared to support their cause. Possible support can come from domestic as well as from international political actors. Second, the NGOs can act by cooperating with state institutions, which might in turn have a self-interest in working with civil society. Third, they can assert pressure on the authorities by mobilizing support from their constituencies. In the following I will examine the three examples in order to understand how and to what extent the NGOs in question have been using influence strategies.

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<sup>35</sup> Russian Security Council: Strategy of National Security of the Russian Federation until 2020, 12 May 2009, <http://www.scrf.gov.ru/documents/99.html>

## 5.1 The Union of the Committees of Soldiers' Mothers in Russia

The Union of the Committees of Soldiers' Mothers in Russia (UCSMR) is the oldest and most well-known NGO among the three.<sup>36</sup> The first committees were formed in 1989 in protest against the treatment of conscripts. Since then, the movement has developed into one of the strongest voices in Russian civil society.<sup>37</sup> Today, about fifty regional committees of soldiers' mothers exist. Their aim is to defend the rights of conscripts and their families by informing them about their right to refuse military conscription.<sup>38</sup> In addition to providing legal consultations on an individual basis, the NGO is engaged in advocacy work, including campaigning for the protection of human rights in the armed forces and the abolishment of obligatory military service.

The particular strength of these committees is their backing in society and their mobilization potential. The conditions of military service, including the legal situation of conscripts, directly affect many Russian families. The image of mothers as protectors demanding rights for their sons has been highly resonant in Russian society, and this credibility has imbued the NGO with moral authority.<sup>39</sup> To a certain degree, the NGO has also been successful in gaining access to political processes. In 2002, a member of the board, Ida Kuklina, was invited to join the *Russian Presidential Council on Civil Society Institutions and Human Rights*.<sup>40</sup> This high-level forum enabled the soldiers' mothers to articulate their positions. Furthermore, the NGO is a member of the *Public Chamber* in a number of Russian regions.

Access to political decision-making processes, however, has been largely blocked for the soldiers' mothers. The Ministry of Defence has not been amenable to cooperating with the committee, which is hardly surprising given how sensitive the issue of the military organization is and how far-reaching the NGOs demands are, including their goal of abolishing conscription. The organization has frequently been criticized by state officials, including the minister of defence.<sup>41</sup> The soldiers' mothers' attempts to form a political party in 2004 were not successful. On the contrary, all signs indicate that state authorities are doing everything in their power to marginalize the influence of the NGO.

## 5.2 The Russian Harm Reduction Network

The Russian Harm Reduction Network (RHRN) is a coalition whose aim is to 'promote harm reduction strategies in order to respond to the HIV/AIDS epidemic and other adverse consequences related to drug use, strengthen public health, and realize the civil rights of drug users and all citizens of Russia.'<sup>42</sup> Harm reduction includes programmes that are focused on mitigating the harm associated with drug use,

<sup>36</sup> Union of the Committees of Soldiers Mothers of Russia / Soiuz komitetov Soldatskikh Materei Rossii, <http://www.ucsmr.ru>, accessed 14 May 2009; see also: All-Russian Public Organisation 'Committee of Soldiers' Mothers', <http://www.soldiers-mothers-rus.ru>, accessed 12 May 2008.

<sup>37</sup> Sundstrom, Lisa McIntosh: Soldiers' Rights Groups in Russia. Civil Society through Russian and Western Eyes, in: Evans, Alfred B. / Henry, Laura A. / Sundstrom, Lisa McIntosh (eds): *Russian Civil Society. A Critical Assessment*, New York/NY: Sharpe, 2006, pp. 178–196, here p. 179.

<sup>38</sup> Human Rights Organisations Soldiers' Mothers of St. Petersburg, <http://www.soldiersmothers.ru/pages/english/presentation.htm>, accessed 10 May 2009.

<sup>39</sup> Sundstrom, Lisa McIntosh: Soldiers' Rights Groups in Russia. Civil Society through Russian and Western Eyes, in: Evans, Alfred B. / Henry, Laura A. / Sundstrom, Lisa McIntosh (eds): *Russian Civil Society. A Critical Assessment*, New York/NY: Sharpe, 2006, pp.178-196, here p. 187.

<sup>40</sup> Russian Presidential Council on Civil Society Institutions and Human Rights, <http://www.sovetpamfilova.ru>, accessed 27 May 2009.

<sup>41</sup> Engleman, Eric: Russian Soldiers' Mothers Work Together, 14 January 2003, in: Johnson's Russia List, <http://www.cdi.org/russia/johnson/7016-12.cfm>

<sup>42</sup> Russian Harm Reduction Network, <http://harmreduction.ru>, accessed 29 April 2009.

e.g. needle exchange and substitution therapy. The RHRN can be regarded as an advocacy organization with a specific policy objective. It calls for the introduction of harm reduction programmes as a means to effectively respond to the spread of HIV-infection among injecting drug users. The network was founded in 2003 and consists of twenty-four member organizations and fifteen individual members. With the support of international donors, the RHRN cooperates with local partners to conduct needle exchange projects throughout Russia. In addition to those local projects, the network engages in advocacy work on the regional and federal levels.

The RHRN is able to articulate its positions primarily due to the support it receives from international organizations, such as UNAIDS or the International Harm Reduction Development Programme (IHRD). Moreover, the network receives substantial funding from international donors. Financial support from the Global Fund, for instance, currently amounts to 16 million US dollars.<sup>43</sup> Via the United Nations General Assembly Special Session (UNGASS) reporting mechanism, the network also has access to political processes. In 2008, the RHRN participated in the preparation of the national report about the implementation of the objectives of the *Declaration of Commitment on HIV/AIDS*. The UNGASS reports are to be prepared every two years and include an opportunity for civil society involvement. Beyond international support, the RHRN has also found political partners in Russia; harm reduction strategies have for example found supporters in the health care system. In 2004, the introduction of needle exchange projects was recommended by Russia's chief sanitary physician, Gennadiy Onishenko.<sup>44</sup> Its participation in the Country Coordination Mechanism (CCM) of the Global Fund<sup>45</sup> and other high-level commissions allows the RHRN to interact with health care officials and advocate for its positions. Many of the organization's local projects are implemented in cooperation with state institutions, e.g. the local AIDS centres. AIDS centres officials often have a self-interest in this collaboration, as joint projects enable them to develop services.

But the RHRN also faces opposition from many sides. Many Russian politicians and health care specialists remain highly critical of harm reduction programmes. Their wariness likely stems from their reluctance to shift away from the country's traditionally conservative drug policy. Substitution therapy remains legally banned in Russia. Needle exchange projects also lack a clear legislative basis, which creates a risk for local implementers.<sup>46</sup> Many projects fail due to the opposition of the local branches of the *Committee on Drug Control* or societal groups, which often argue that harm reduction promotes drug use and endangers young people. This strong opposition, from state institutions like the *Committee on Drug Control* as well as from society, forms an insuperable barrier for the advocacy of harm reduction in Russia and significantly restricts the RHRN's ability to exert influence on policy-making.

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<sup>43</sup> The Global Fund to fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria: Russian Federation, Round 5, <http://www.theglobalfund.org/programs/grant/?compid=1197&grantid=483&lang=en&CountryId=RUS>, accessed 29 May 2009.

<sup>44</sup> Decree on Measures Directed to the Counteraction of the Spread of HIV-infection in the Russian Federation / Postanovlenie 'Ob aktivizatsii meropriyatii napravlennykh na protivodeistvie rasprostraneniui VICH-infektsii v Rossiiskoi Federatsii', 14 January 2004, in: Federal Service for Supervision in Consumer Rights Protection and Human Welfare, <http://www.rosпотреbnadzor.ru>

<sup>45</sup> The Global Fund to fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria: Country Coordinating Mechanism, <http://www.theglobalfund.org/programs/ccm/?CountryId=RUS&lang=en>, accessed 25 May 2009.

<sup>46</sup> Interview NGO representative, St. Petersburg, 6 October 2008.

### 5.3 The Russian Association of People Living with HIV

The Russian Association of People Living with HIV is a network representing the rights and interests of HIV-positive people in Russia. On the federal level the association is currently in the process of institutional development.<sup>47</sup> It emerged from different regional organizations, such as the movement 'FrontAIDS'<sup>48</sup> and the NGO 'Community of People Living with HIV'<sup>49</sup>. In many regions, people living with HIV (PLWH) have organized themselves into self-help groups, often based on the local AIDS centres. In May 2009 the Russian Association of PLWH was officially registered as countrywide umbrella organization. It is based on individual membership and provides an internal mailing list, connecting about 200 members throughout the country.<sup>50</sup> In addition to implementing services and providing support for their members, the association strives to engage in advocacy work to defend the rights of PLWH in Russia, particularly in terms of access to antiretroviral therapy and other medical services as well as human rights protection. An important facet of the association is the information exchange it has with local groups, which allows the network to monitor local access to treatment. The organization is thereby able to hold the institutions accountable if promised services are not delivered.

The Russian Association of People Living with HIV has access to political processes due to the support it receives from international organizations. The UNGASS Declaration particularly emphasizes the need to include PLWH in any effective response to HIV/AIDS.<sup>51</sup> This creates opportunities for participation. The impact of the association on decision-making processes, however, is limited, partly due to poorly developed capacities. Still, it has succeeded in establishing contacts with political actors, such as the *Parliamentary Commission on HIV/AIDS*.<sup>52</sup> It is also engaged with state institutions on the local level. AIDS centres have an interest in cooperating with PLWH organizations or initiative groups, because they can help enhance patient outreach and improve treatment adherence on the basis of peer-to-peer counselling. The mobilization potential of the association, on the other hand, is low. HIV-positive people are a marginalized group in Russian society. Moreover, the community itself is divided, resulting in a low level of self-organization. This impedes the development of a strong advocacy association able to improve the legal and social situation of PLWH in Russia.

## 6. Are NGOs able to achieve social change?

The NGOs presented above aim to improve conditions for particular social groups. All three organizations came into existence when citizens joined forces in order to solve problems they were facing in their daily lives. By providing services for members or clients, the NGOs are responding to concrete social needs. However, they do not restrict themselves to mutual aid and social services. Shortcomings in state services as well as insufficient human rights protection has created a necessity to engage in advo-

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<sup>47</sup> Interview NGO representative, Moscow, 15 February, see also: UNDP: Support to institutional development of the Russian Association of People living with HIV (PLHIV), <http://www.undp.ru/index.phtml?iso=RU&lid=1&cmd=programs5>, accessed 28 May 2009.

<sup>48</sup> FrontADIS, <http://www.frontaids.org>, accessed 28 May 2009.

<sup>49</sup> Community of People Living with HIV, <http://www.positivenet.ru/>, accessed 30 May 2009.

<sup>50</sup> International Treatment Preparedness Coalition in Eastern Europe and Central Asia: Report on Civil Society Involvement into the Preparation of the Country Report of the Russian Federation for UNGASS 2008, Saint-Petersburg 2008, here p. 5.

<sup>51</sup> United Nations General Assembly Special Session dedicated to HIV/AIDS: Declaration on Commitment on HIV/AIDS, 25–27 June 2001, [http://data.unaids.org/publications/irc-pub03/aidsdeclaration\\_en.pdf](http://data.unaids.org/publications/irc-pub03/aidsdeclaration_en.pdf)

<sup>52</sup> Interview NGO representative, Moscow, 15 February 2008.

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cacy. The NGOs are thereby striving to change existing policies in order to improve the social situation of their constituency and defend their rights. Their ability to achieve those changes depends both on the context in which they are operating and the strategies they use to open up opportunities for influence, including gaining access to the policy-making process, finding political allies and mobilizing their constituencies.

The study of the three NGOs' influence strategies reveals a mixed record. Although they are striving to achieve change, their access to political decision-making processes remains limited. The *Committees of Soldiers' Mothers* possess significant mobilizing potential in society, but lack access to state institutions and support from political actors, which hinders their ability to exert influence. The *Russian Harm Reduction Network* and the *Russian Association of People Living with HIV* receive substantial support from international organizations, but have little backing in society. Although they find supporters in state institutions, such as AIDS centres that are interested in cooperation, they also face widespread opposition, which prevents them from successfully voicing their recommendations.

Given the context of the civil society sector in Russia, the limited impact of the NGOs comes as no surprise. In Russia's managed democracy, the state effectively controls independent civic engagement. Growing concern about social problems on the part of the political elite might, however, open opportunities for NGOs in the future.