

# 17 A Remedy for Apathy? The Role of NGOs in Activating Citizens in Today's Russia

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This text stems from my research interest in the origins, the development and the conditions of civil society in Russia. One of the phenomena under study was the extent to which Russia's citizens are interested in actively participating in social and political life of their country, region and local community. As a result, the notion of *apathy* surfaced from a number of research projects carried out by other scholars in Russia. Another phenomenon, that appeared to be of great concern to many observers, was that of Western assistance. The state authorities, as well as NGO leaders and the general public were taking very different and changing attitudes towards the presence and work of foreign donors.

My research on civil society in Russia is based on analyses of various studies carried out by Russian and Western scholars, reports presented by individual NGOs, results of numerous public opinion polls as well as on relevant literature on the Russian society at large.

This article is an attempt to document and to explain conditions of work done by Russian non-governmental organisations, assisted by Western know-how and funds, in awakening civic activism among Russia's inhabitants. To acquaint readers with the historical conditions under which consecutive generations have been brought up, a phenomenon called '*Oblomščina*' is discussed. This is followed by an account of the potential impact of the Soviet legacy on today's Russia and its citizens and a presentation of the current conditions under which non-governmental organisations work, including discussion of a short report on Western assistance. The article ends with examples of well-functioning NGOs and some concluding remarks.

## **The Oblomov Syndrome**

An interesting remark could be made on 'the Russian national character', which is often referred to as the 'Oblomov syndrome' or '*Oblomščina*'. The name comes from a novel entitled *Oblomov* (1859/1858) by Ivan A. Gončarov

(1812–1891).<sup>1</sup> The (anti-)hero of the novel, Ilja Iljič Oblomov has become a symbol of indolence and inactivity, being a completely lethargic person. He spends his time mostly in bed or trying to get up. He declares to his servant his worry about the worsening condition of his estates but does nothing about it. The family and estate's name itself tells the reader about the condition that the residence was in – the Russian word *oblomok* means a broken-off piece.

He assures his friends that the social life of Sankt-Petersburg really appeals to him, but he lacks the will to dress and go out “in typical Oblomov fashion, [he] preferred the comforts of his own sybaritic life to the upset and strain of pursuing active policies” (Peace, 1991, p. 2). *Oblomščina*, thus, is:

a model of Russian attitudes to work which are regrettably too prevalent. Some well known symptoms of this disease are: a talismanic belief that putting things on paper is the same as doing them, an indifference to keeping to agreed schedules and actions, a preference to theorise rather than to apply an undoubted intelligence to the identification and solution of real problems. (Kennaway, 1997, p. 14)

Ilja Iljič Oblomov, a man in constant apathetic lethargy, was tormented by uncertainty on what he was to do. The question: *Čto delat'?* (What is to be done?) is, apparently, quite popular among Russian writers and ideologues. In 1862, four years after Gončarov's *Oblomov*, a novel by Nikolaj Gavrilovič Černyševskij appeared entitled *What is to be done?* (The answer was: create new men and women.) An Oblomov-like answer was given by a male hero in one of Turgenev's novels: “*Čto delat'?* *Razumeetsja, pokorit'sja sud'be*” [What is to be done? Subjugate to fate, naturally].

In 1902, a certain Vladimir Il'jič Ul'janov, known better as Lenin, published eminently political treatise entitled *What is to be done?* (The answer: make a revolution.) Indeed, revolutions used to activate many ... and decapitate some. However, despite the revolution, and many beheaded citizens in Soviet Russia, the word *Oblomščina* survived into the bolsheviks times. Bukharin, for instance, commented at his own trial that *Oblomščina* was one of the characteristic features of the Soviet bureaucracy.<sup>2</sup> *Oblomščina* survived also the collapse of the communist regime: in a recent on-line dictionary of the Russian language one can find ‘Oblomov’ with its explanation: ‘see *lazy*’.<sup>3</sup>

1 Electronic version available at: <http://www.oblomovka.com/eldritch/iag/oblomov.txt>

2 Another hero of Gončarov's novel is Štol'c – quite an opposite character to Oblomov. He does know the ‘rules of the game’ and how to adjust his actions to them; he is a ‘wise-guy’ and a realist. Interestingly, a well-known Russian political scientist, Andrej Piontkovskij called president Putin a “Štol'c at the Kremlin”.

3 *Slovar' russkich sinonimov i schodnych po smyslu vyraženij* [Dictionary of Russian synonyms and synonymous phrases] <http://encycl.yandex.ru>

So, *what is to be done* about such an attitude? A remedy lies in activating citizens through a network of non-governmental organisations. However, to create an open society out of such traditions and habits, to develop a free market, and to protect individual rights against violence and corruption are most daunting political and social tasks.

## **Points of Departure**

### *The Soviet Legacy*

Together with the changes in the State's political and economic realms the Russian society at large as well as individual citizens have undergone a remarkable transformation. To dismantle the former authoritarian regime and to advance democratic rules in post-Soviet Russia new ways of organising the society have to be implemented. To make it possible that the voices of individual citizens will be heard, some constitutive elements of the civil society have been established. Among them, a variety of voluntary associations play a crucial role in bringing together people, formulating their needs and wishes. Based on Western European and American experiences, these associations are perceived as a constitutive element of a civil society *in statu nascendi*. It is, thus, foreign donors (governmental agencies or individual organisations) who have helped to create them in Russia.

Newly started non-governmental organisations (NGOs) need not only to convince the state and local authorities to be treated as serious partners but also to combat remnants of communism deeply rooted in the Russian citizenry. Seven decades of the Soviet rule resulted in the destruction of communities' cohesiveness, which aggravated people's mistrust and impassivity. According to the Soviet constitution it was possible to establish a non-governmental organisation. However, the Soviet practice showed that it was impossible to set up an association without the authorities' intervention and control. Instead, people were expected to 'volunteer' their time, and energy, to attend meetings arranged by state-initiated and state-controlled organisations. Parallel to constraints put on associations, also an absence of religious congregations limited people's chances to meet and interact with each other.

One would expect that when long-awaited democratic rules have been implemented, citizens would use freedom to the full. New possibilities raised expectations, demands and activity. Eventually, however, democratisation *à la Russe* showed its shortcomings. A new-old political class did not meet people's hopes: only a few could benefit from economic reforms while for many the standard of living deteriorated. All that could hardly increase the level of citizens' commitment.

This doubt is corroborated by research findings and numerous public opinion polls, which seek to determine the state of people's minds in today's Russia. Sociological surveys conducted regularly in the years 1992-1998 give a thorough insight into this problem. The collected data may provide a reliable picture of various factors and phenomena, such as dynamics of changes in attitudes of Russia's inhabitants towards economic, political and social reforms; citizens' feelings and sentiments; and electoral preferences. The surveys entitled: *How are you doing, Russia?* [Kak živeš, Rossija?] contained questionnaires, which were distributed among a representative sample of adult population of the whole country (Levašov, 2001). They were carried out by a large team of researchers from a special unit of the Institute of Socio-political Research of the Russian Academy of Sciences. The respondents were selected according to sex, age, education, place of living, nationality, social status and profession. The surveys were carried out in cities and villages in all twelve economic zones and across the whole country.

It is hardly possible to speak of active citizens when one of these nationwide representative surveys revealed, that 88.6 percent of adult citizens does not take part in any social or political activity. The biggest group of passive citizens consists of an age group of 30-45 years old; as much as 92.5 percent among 35-39 years old are not active at all (Levašov, 2001, p. 153).

The results show that despite implementing democratic rights and freedoms Russia's citizens fail to actively engage themselves in political life of their country. Even though a significant number of adult citizens rejected previous mechanisms of involving people in political life of the country, they still need to develop a new motivational system of becoming active.

In general, the 1992 survey, the first one in a series of nation-wide surveys conducted throughout the 1990s, disclosed respondents' discomfort and dissatisfaction with the living conditions, and their frail trust in possibilities to change those conditions, even in a distant future (Levašov, 2001, p. 205).

One of the explanations for this apathy and/or reluctance is a demographic composition of the Russian society. The social group which has been hit most severely by new rules of market economy is elderly people, who make up 25 percent of the whole population, and as much as 35 percent of the electorate (Levašov, 2001, p. 388). The situation they were put into exacerbated passivity and often fatalism.

The findings collected through public opinion polls and nationwide sociological surveys between 1992-1999 can be corroborated by answers taken from in-depth interviews. In 1998 and 2000 questions were put to 'ordinary' Russians to learn about how they assessed the functioning of various state agencies and what changes they would like to make (Carnaghan, 2001). The interviews, conducted in Russian, were taken throughout the whole country in large cities such as Moscow and Novosibirsk, medium-sized towns like Voronež

and Krasnojarsk, and even in a small collective farm in Siberia. The interviewees varied with respect to age, education and political sympathies. The researcher concluded that:

Russians are bothered by the ways existing institutions fail to reflect the views and protect the interests of ordinary citizens, [and by] their tendency toward unproductive conflict and overcentralization. Although many citizens support democratic values, they are less certain that their institutions do the same. (Carnaghan, 2001, p. 337)

Clearly, citizens of Russia, whether in large metropolises or in small towns, did not have any reasons for feeling comfortable and peaceful. Even despite political upheaval the daily life of many did not alter much. Like in previous decades they spent their days as 'urban hunters and gatherers'. To provide themselves and their families with the necessities of life still took a bigger part of their free time (as well as working time). Women especially were hit by that (Ryan, 1993).

There is almost unanimous agreement among social and political scientists to see the origins of this situation in the Soviet legacy. During the Soviet regime, citizens were discouraged from taking, or even showing, an initiative, especially in social and political lives.

Under enduring despotism... [t]ime appears to stand still. Individuals continue to be born, to mature, to work and to love, to play and to quarrel, to have children and to die, and yet everything around them becomes motionless, petrified and repetitious. Political life becomes utterly boring. (Keane, 1998, p. 92-93)

When state agencies, governmental or political institutions were unresponsive to citizens, they – in turn – felt no loyalty to them. The authoritarian regime expected three 'virtues' of the Soviet citizens: obedience, fear, and habit. Among the most averted vices, the citizens could be charged for, were an independent mind, frankness and one's own initiative.

After decades of state domination, enforced activism and mutual suspicion, most Russians came to regard the public sphere as a realm of hypocrisy and surveillance rather than tolerance and cooperation. In this atmosphere, many retreated as much as possible into the privacy of their family and a close circle of friends. (Richter, 2000)

After being exposed to the Soviet school system, and socialised by the Soviet labour market, many citizens became unable to act freely. Political and civil rights were not respected by the state authorities while most citizens were unable, or unwilling, to demand them. Indifference, contentment, apathy became dominant attitudes of the majority.

In 1991 Jurij Afanas'ev, a well-known historian, wrote about the mood prevailing among people:

In our amoeba-like social life people are not seen as having different interests or as belonging to different groups. In this society everyone or almost everyone is supposed to be the same; everyone works for the state, everyone is on salary, everyone is on a leash... Most people have not expressed a desire for anything new, which seems clear evidence that an enormous number of people in our society do not want positive changes in it. (Afanas'ev, 1991, p. 38)

Personally, I cannot see and accept this direct causal interrelationship between apathy and Afanas'ev's conclusion that people do not wish positive changes. For me it is a too far-fetched assumption. Yet, it is true that apathy did exist and is clearly present today.

Political apathy has been defined as “a loss or suppression of emotional affect with regard to, a listlessness, a loss of interest in, some issue, set of issues, or perhaps politics itself” (DeLuca, 1995, p. 191). It is first and foremost “a state of mind or a political fate brought about by forces, structures, institutions, or elite manipulation over which one has little or no control, and perhaps little knowledge” (p. 11).

The collapse of the Soviet state and its ideology raised many expectations – inside and outside the country. A great chance of bringing about changes in people's attitudes has been seen, in the West, through establishing elements of civil society. Various European, US and international agencies and organisations have decided then to invest their funds and know-how in non-governmental organisations. In this way foreign volunteers and donors have helped to foster democracy in Russia. Generally, they all have been regarded as idealistic and committed people.

### *Current Conditions*

Estimates of the number of NGOs actually existing in Russia vary greatly – from 30,000 to 100,000. Even the official statistics are not very reliable. According to them on January 1, 2000 there were 275,000 non-governmental and non-municipal organisations registered. However, it is estimated that only approximately seventy thousand were really active. They engaged about 2.5 million volunteers and employees (Diligenskij, 2001, p. 15). According to a poll

carried out in June 2001 only five percent of Russians counted themselves as members of any organisation.<sup>4</sup>

As in any other country, the Russian non-governmental organisations tend to focus on the following:

- motivating individuals to act as citizens in all aspects of society rather than bowing to or depending on state power and beneficence;
- promoting pluralism and diversity in society, such as protecting and strengthening cultural, ethnic, religious, linguistic and other identities;
- creating an alternative to centralised state agencies for providing services with greater independence and flexibility;
- establishing the mechanisms by which governments and the market can be held accountable by the public (Judge, 1995).

In the case of Russia, an especially important value the non-governmental organisations have, is the fact that they promote issues previously ignored by the Soviet authorities (or which even were forbidden) and that they contribute to the awakening of civic engagement among the population. What was called 'anti-State political activity' of the few some 12-15 years ago is today a virtue attracting many.

It is possible to distinguish at least two main factors for an explosive growth of voluntary organisations. The first is all the political changes, which occurred in the early 1990s. The collapse of the authoritarian regime opened new possibilities and conditions to participate in political, social and economic life of the country. The second is a breakdown of the socialist welfare state – several services have been reduced or ceased to be provided, thus this social vacuum has been filled by newly established voluntary organisations (although the State is still regarded as the principal provider of welfare services).

However, the conditions under which the Russian non-governmental organisations had to function were all but favourable:

The lack of a civil society, the absence of a tradition of non-governmental organisations and social movements, and the impoverished economic infrastructure available to support such organisations all combine to make the development of a

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4 See *Obščestvennye organizacii v Rossii* [Social organisations in Russia], June 28, 2001 <http://www.fom.ru/survey/dominant/224/566/1880.html>

domestic funding base very difficult for a social movement in today's Russia.  
(Sperling, 1998)

One of the most immediate needs was to reform legislation regarding non-governmental organisations. In the summer of 1995 the president of the Russian Federation, Boris Yeltsin, signed a law, which defined the rules under which charity and voluntary organisations could work. The law enabled citizens to establish the so-called 'public associations'. It also provided a tool to hinder arbitrary interference of state, regional or local authorities. It was the first attempt of the federal government and parliament to eliminate distrust between governmental agencies and NGOs.

The scope of interests, areas of work or issues that are taken up by Russian NGOs do not differ much from any Western ones. NGOs work with such issues as: human rights, ecology, protection of minorities' rights, education in various spheres of public life, charity, voluntary work for the elderly, disabled, orphans, juvenile delinquents, even assisting in search for relatives perished during the World War II.

Some NGOs, especially in the early 1990s, were rather suspicious and reluctant to accept grants from the state agencies. It was feared that with governmental funds there would come control and/or influence. Interestingly, a few organisations showed similar suspicion towards Western donors – whether individual, corporate or governmental.

Lack of money is sometimes compensated by outreach and publicity campaigns that are consciously and professionally organised. The co-operation of many NGOs with local media and an extensive use of the Internet,

poses a great threat to apathetic political bodies and elites, proving to be the greatest asset groups have to secure their role as intermediaries in state-society dialogue.  
(Halley, 1996)

Very often the level of activity depends entirely on its leader's personality. In due course people involved in NGOs changed from engaged idealists to more professional activists. What did not change much is the dominant position of middle-aged women at the inside. Some experts believe this phenomenon may be explained by the fact that other spheres of life, like business and politics, are controlled almost entirely by men.

One of the main reasons to get involved, in starting up or joining an NGO, is personal self-realisation and moral satisfaction. Many NGO leaders and activists stress that they take part in voluntary associations for social purposes, to serve society, or for the public good (Petrenko, 2001, pp. 60-61). There is a common

phenomenon characteristic for many Russian NGOs, and an odd side effect of a depressing economic situation of the country. Obviously the more difficult economic conditions people live in, the more limited opportunities for social movements and citizens' associations to obtain necessary funds. On the other hand, however, unemployment provides many groups with a large number of voluntary workers. They have much time to spare, and, often, possess useful skills. Another interesting phenomenon is when people such as orphans, war veterans and invalids who were at first recipients of assistance from a given NGO eventually became active members of the organisation themselves.

### **Assistance from Abroad**

Many people in Russia soon became aware that political and economic changes were brought about 'from above'. To continue their implementation, and to maintain those already achieved, a broad support 'from below' was necessary. Thus, new ways of involving citizens to be able to run their own lives, as well as the life of the society at large, had to be found and tested. To let people voice their needs a new forum was established. A number of associations were set up along mutually shared interests, needs or ambitions. Soon, it became clear that advice and help from the more experienced would be necessary. Oddly enough, Western specialists started arriving in Russia (read: Moscow and Saint-Petersburg) even before they were called upon. One can speak of a massive invasion by a number of foreign NGO prophets in mid-1990s. The keywords of that period were democracy, rule of law, capacity-building.

Among the most actively involved agencies in this work were the Soros Foundation Open Society, USAID (primarily through the Eurasia Foundation), the National Endowment for Democracy, and the European Union Phare/Tacis Program.

It was planned, and expected, that the Western NGO experts would show how to build voluntary associations as 'flat organisations', and avoid hierarchical forms. The experts' role was also to explain why and how leaders of a particular NGO should be accountable to their members. Also practical skills would be taught, such as how to formulate objectives and to design an organisation's programme, how to apply for (Western) grants, how to run an NGO office. These experts explained also the need for and techniques of lobbying or approaching representatives of state and municipal authorities. They advocated a dialogue instead of confrontation; clarified the need for new legislation and benefits of co-operation.

What came out when the Western ideals met the Russian reality? Not all good intentions turned out to be feasible; some, apparently, were misplaced. Enthusiasm, good will and personal commitment did not always result in

intended outcomes. The two most blatant errors were connected with attempts to implant Western values and solutions into a Russian soil and with financial dependency of Russian NGOs. As one American activist soberly observed:

Creating NGOs from the outside does not ensure that these will have a democratic content or aspire to being vehicles of social and political change or indeed grow roots and hence legitimacy in local contexts. (Howell, 1999)

Too often Western helpers failed to examine realities of the country they were trying to help, could not find solutions appropriate for the specific Russian culture and ignored local needs and problems.

As a rule Western donors give grants to organisations, not to individuals (with an exception of travel grants and the so-called 'research funds'). Only leaders of NGOs are sometimes paid monthly salaries. Thus,

in order for as many people as possible to get funding, the incentive is for many people to form their own small groups. Competition arises for funding and for fringe benefits, like trips abroad. Foreign funding creates massive competition over these scarce resources, which then complicates the movement-building process: it is in the interest of groups to maintain an individual identity, rather than collaborate with other groups and risk being overshadowed. The presence of scarce and valued resources also fosters jealousy. (Sperling, 1998)

Therefore some Russian critics accuse NGO activists of being engaged in the organisations only for their own, personal benefits, especially if Western donors finance them.

Naturally, the Western assistance did not only create problems, envy and corruption among committed idealists. It definitely contributed to setting up many NGOs, raising professionalism of their leaders and staff, and expressing problems and needs of many local communities. Some of the oldest organisations established with the Western donors' support succeeded in building up a network of similar organisations in several cities of the vast country. For instance, the Independent Women's Forum (set up in 1991 with grants from the Ford Foundation) today is co-ordinating work of some 200 women's groups throughout the Russian Federation. Increasing professionalism of Russian NGOs can be attributed to numerous, specially designed training courses organised by Western specialists.

The competitiveness of applying for, and obtaining, foreign grants made NGO activists learn not only how to fill in necessary forms, but also the 'rules of

the game' in selection processes. Even the much-criticised practice of paying salaries (usually rather low) to activists, often had a stimulating effect. Thanks to these modest allowances people could stay within their organisations and work for the benefit of others.

Most newly established non-governmental organisations usually lack basic resources, such as skills, finances, techniques and technology. These are what the Western donor organisations and NGOs can offer. Often this is exactly what has actually been provided.

## Examples<sup>5</sup>

Examples from the field would prove that in several cases NGOs made an actual impact and contributed to an awakening of interest, an engagement and commitment for the common good among Russian citizens; with or without direct Western assistance. Some of those organisations have long-lasting experience of financial hardship. The effectiveness of Western donors and NGOs varied extensively: some did succeed in giving useful help and training to would-be local leaders, but others failed in their attempts.

The first independent civic organisations were established in the Soviet Union in the late 1980s, during the so-called Gorbachev's *perestrojka* (1986-1991). In the beginning, these organisations focused mainly on the struggle for freedom of speech, the remembrance of the victims of Stalin terror, and the protection of the environment from gross abuses of state authorities and industries. In due course, parallel to the changes in political, economic and social life, people started to organise associations along common interests or causes. They focused on such questions as the disabled, women's issues (especially domestic violence, often alcohol abuse related), rights of consumers, child protection, rights of patients and such like.

The oldest, and still existing, NGOs are human rights groups. The best known is the *Memorial – Historical, Educational and Charitable Society* founded in 1988 by leading dissidents of that time, with a well-known nuclear physicist Andrej Sacharov and a historian Jurij Afanas'ev. Its main activity was to commemorate the victims of Stalin's terror, to help Gulag survivors and their families, and to protest against political persecutions. One of the first achievements of the Society was the successful lobbying towards the promulgation in 1991 of the Law on Rehabilitation of Victims of Political Repression. This enactment reinstated civil rights to many political prisoners of the Soviet regime. For the last decade the *Memorial Society* has covered a broad

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5 Information on presented below organisations have been gathered through various internet sites in a search done in July, and repeated in December, 2003. Very seldom official sites of individual NGO's give information concerning sources of their financing.

scope of activities. Within its educational-historical work it runs archives documenting atrocities committed by the Soviet regime against its own citizens, as well as a museum and a number of libraries. It carries out research through archives and collects oral testimonies of former Gulag prisoners and other persecuted persons. The results of this work are documented in a series called the *Books of Memory* (more than fifty have already been published); lists of the executed victims in different regions of Russia are constantly being updated. Another area of its work is human rights protection. Activists of the *Memorial Society* monitor the sites of armed conflicts on Russia's territory (first and foremost in Chechnya) but even in some post-Soviet states such as Azerbaijan and Moldova. Members of the Society also monitor conditions under which Russian convicts live. Moreover, they work with juvenile offenders and try to help newly released inmates. The third area the Memorial Society is involved in is charitable work. The Society's staff and activists provide medical, legal and also material help to former political prisoners as well as to current victims of political persecutions. The *Memorial Society* works through its Moscow-based headquarters and more than 100 affiliated centres throughout the Russian Federation and the Commonwealth of Independent States.

In 1989 another human rights organisation was set up, namely the *Union of the Committees of Soldiers' Mothers of Russia* (until 1998 known as the *Committee of Soldiers Mothers of Russia*). It was established to expose and combat violation of human rights within the Soviet army, such as bullying, severe punishments and other abuses that could lead as far as conscripts committing suicide. The regional Committees and their Union focus on providing legal advice, material and moral support to families. So far the original Committee has worked to persuade politicians to deal with a legal vacuum in the military sphere. It has been successful in making the then president of the Soviet Union, Michail Gorbačev, issue in 1990 the decree obliging military authorities to accept the Committee's proposals. The same year another presidential decree stipulated that atonement would be paid to families after soldiers' death. From the mid-1990s the Committee focused its attention on human rights violation in Chechnya. Due to its commitment and networking as many as five hundred soldiers who in 1995/96 refused to be drafted to troops to be sent to Chechnya became acquitted from allegations. Recently, the *Union of the Committees* has started lobbying for military reform leading to the abolishment of compulsory drafting of young men. Eventually it gained such a standing that since 1998 even military prosecutors have started to co-operate with it. The Union actively co-operates with other human rights NGOs in promoting ideas of civil society in Russia. The Union is one of very few Russian NGOs, which generate sufficient funds to operate without a desperate need to rely on foreign donors. It runs regional branches throughout the whole country.

One of the most important roles in voluntary work for Russian society is probably that undertaken by lawyers. Taking into account the traditional lack of respect for the law inherited after Tsarist and communist authoritarian regimes, Russian citizens acutely need incentives to prove that written laws are expected to be obeyed by authorities as much as by individual citizens. Several, especially young, jurists with relevant knowledge started to establish and work in legal aid centres. One of the oldest NGOs run by lawyers is the *Ecojuris – Institute of Environmental Law*. Lawyers committed to environmental issues established it in Moscow in 1991. It is active in commenting on or recommending relevant laws and regulations, defending citizens' environmental rights, providing legal assistance for citizens and non-governmental organizations, maintaining a database of existing legislation, initiating environmental court cases at regional and federal levels and in working for greater transparency of state and regional authorities. It is very committed to defending the rights of the indigenous nations of the North, Siberia and the Far East to the traditional natural environment. *Ecojuris* has organized several training courses for lawyers and environmental NGOs. It is also concerned about making the general public aware of and knowledgeable about issues related to the natural environment. Thus it publishes a series of books on Russian legislation in the sphere of environmental protection and natural resources and a bulletin entitled *Public Interest Environmental Law Newsletter*. In co-operation with a Western NGO it published a 'citizens' guide' entitled *Environmental Protection: Towards legal actions by Russian citizens* and two practical manuals for individual citizens and for NGOs: *Defending Your Environmental Rights* and *Defending Your Environmental Rights in Court*. The work done by the *Ecojuris* attracted a number of Western donors, such as the MacArthur Foundation, the Soros Foundation, the Trust for Mutual Understanding, the US AID, the American Embassy in Russia, the Dutch government, as well as several Russian authorities, government agencies and private donors. Among the biggest successes of the *Ecojuris* are several cases won before the Supreme Court of the Russian Federation. As with the *Committee of Soldiers' Mothers*, the original NGO grew into a coalition of related organisations. In February 1997 *Ecojuris* set up the *Network of Russian Public Interest Environmental Lawyers*. The Network comprises of more than forty individual lawyers and public interest environmental law NGOs from across the whole country. Most of them are active in defending citizens' rights to a fair hearing in the courts of law. In 2000 *Ecojuris* initiated an international network of environmental lawyers. Several solicitors from six post-Soviet countries joined the *Ecojuris* to form the *Eurasian Public Interest Environmental Law Network*.

There are other NGOs that succeeded in achieving their goals against formidable foes and lack of public support. The late 1990s was a time of an extraordinary growth of human rights organisations. In 1998 among the 89

political units constituting the Russian Federation only 30 had NGOs oriented to human rights. A year later, there were twice as many (McAuley, 2001).

After the collapse of the Soviet Union new kinds of NGOs could start to operate. Among them were organisations dealing with ethnic problems. They were established by members of the many nations and ethnic groups that had been subjected to atrocious treatment and expulsions during Stalin era. They had to organise themselves,

in order to tackle their problems in the face of the indifference and inaction of government. Their relationships with state authorities evolved in an atmosphere of confrontation, with NGOs largely remaining weak and unheard. (Vitkovskaya, 2000)

However, with effective help from international NGOs, these organisations learned how to approach and influence authorities. They became stronger through establishing a network of similar groups and founding two organisations at the nation-wide level – the *Forum for Migration Organisations* and the *Foundation Compatriots*. Forced migrants constitute over 5 percent of the Russian Federation electorate, which is not an insignificant factor in their *jeu-de-force* with authorities.

Interestingly enough, the Internet plays a very important role in setting up and maintaining NGOs. To use new information and communication facilities for NGOs' own purposes was an idea brought to Russia by American NGO activists. Based on the US experiences, the Internet has become a tool for facilitating networking between similar NGOs' active in various places, for enabling contacts with donors, international agencies and individuals. It has helped establishing citizen groups in small towns far away from political centres. One of the most active Western organisations helping Russian NGOs in using the Internet capacities is a US-Russian organisation *Friends & Partners*. Since 1998 it has helped to establish the so-called civic networking websites throughout the Russian Federation.

The Internet also plays an important role in updating NGOs on changes in relevant legislation, planned political briefings and the like. It made feasible quick and indiscriminating access to various databases, news bulletins and created the possibility of local NGO publishing. The usefulness of the Internet is often mentioned by Russian NGOs (Halley 1996).

## Conclusions

It is rather difficult for an ordinary Russian citizen to commit him/herself and be active. During the last 10-15 years, despite all the changes, social activism has

not been encouraged. Although during the *perestrojka* period and the first years of the new Russian Federation a politicisation of 'the masses' did occur, the process of getting rid of the Soviet system was, since the very beginning, an initiative 'from above', in that it was initiated, controlled and run by the highest echelons of political class. In practice, the Soviet system was not defeated: it merely collapsed. Eventually more and more citizens lost their passion and interest, and became dissatisfied with their leaders and their programmes. The familiar state of apathy and indifference seemed to be a safer option.

Many NGOs, set up with or without Western assistance, moved into such spheres of life which the State's services have abandoned; they often succeeded in providing an alternative, even if on a limited scale, to the collapsed state sector. In some instances Western partners contributed to bringing about democratic changes in local communities. Undoubtedly, they also helped them to learn how to write proposals, seek grants, make budgets and similar important technicalities concerning how to run an NGO on a day-to-day basis. One of the Western observers noticed with satisfaction, that,

Donors have done a great job in nurturing a growing cadre of committed NGO professionals with the organisational skills and the networks to sustain their activities in the face of an often hostile social and legal environment. (Richter, 2000)

Throughout the 1990s, foreign assistance was an important, sometimes the only, source of income (mostly very modest). It helped many small local NGOs in surviving daily-life problems. Close co-operation between foreign volunteers and local people meant new fields of activities could be identified and dealt with. Without the support, both financial and in terms of expertise, many Russian NGOs would not have survived the enthusiasm of their leaders.

Various kinds of social movements emerged across the whole country. By the end of 1990s, many of them were well rooted in their local communities and had established the co-operation of local authorities. In many cities nongovernmental organisations got together and created centres of civil society – places where legal, editorial and practical help could be obtained.

Naturally many, if not all, Russian NGOs face more or less serious obstacles. One of the most prevalent is lack of recognition as legitimate partners from the state and municipal authorities. Both governmental officials and 'ordinary people' regard the volunteers as a mixture of hobbyists and philanthropists.

Experiences and achievements of some NGOs give, however, grounds for some optimism:

NGOs have been more successful in building relations with legislative branch structures – both federal and local. They have been involved in the overall effort to draft laws, carry out legislators' initiatives and are forming the migration lobby in the Russian parliament. (Vitkovskaya, 2000)

Natalya Popova, a founder and a leader of one of the NGOs, is convinced that non-governmental organisations have a real impact on Russian society: "NGOs have the advantage of being more flexible, more adaptable and more sensitive to people's needs than the state" (cited in Lambroschini, 1999).

Halley (1996) was able to establish factors which conditioned success or failure of Russian NGOs. The successful ones had their goals very clearly defined; they paid attention to introducing general public to their objectives and work; they showed the ability to raise funds from local donors, thus avoiding financial dependence on Western sources. But many Russian NGOs are still fragile. Some of them are depending on the state authorities' benevolence, many others seek direct financial support from the State (Choroč, 1998, p. 201). Hence, the well-meant mission of Western donors and sister organisations is not yet completed.

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