

## **NGOs, Policy Entrepreneurship and Child Protection in Russia: Pitfalls and Prospects for Civil Society**

By Elena Bogdanova, Centre for Independent Social Research/University of Eastern Finland, and Eleanor Bindman, University of London

Elena Bogdanova is a research fellow at the Centre for Independent Social Research and visiting lecturer at the University of Eastern Finland. E-mail: bogdanova.nova@gmail.com.

Eleanor Bindman is a specialist in Russian politics at the School of Politics and International Relations, Queen Mary University of London. E-mail: e.bindman@qmul.ac.uk.

**Abstract:** Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in contemporary Russia operate within both specific institutional conditions and the frequently contradictory circumstances imposed by a hybrid political regime. Legislation and funding policy at the federal and regional levels veers between restricting and enabling their ability to act and raises questions about the extent to which NGOs can operate independently and participate in the development of a more robust civil society in Russia. In the particular sphere of child protection, which remains very much within the domain of the state, NGOs must cooperate closely with the authorities in order to implement their projects and, whether formally or informally, often become implementers of state social policy as a result. This article explores how NGOs involved in the protection of children living in state institutions interact with state actors in their policy networks and the extent to which such networks may offer these NGOs some scope to act as “policy entrepreneurs” with some degree of influence over the direction of policy development and practice in their area of expertise. It presents the results of empirical research on the activities of NGOs working with vulnerable children in St. Petersburg and Samara, which reveals the interactions between these organizations and the authorities to be a complex, multi-layered process which, nevertheless, allows them some space for autonomy and the development of policy options.

In recent years, NGOs in Russia have been forced to function within the conditions of what has been called a “hybrid” or “electoral authoritarian” regime, which contains elements of both democracy and authoritarianism, yet behaves quite differently from more straightforwardly democratic or authoritarian political systems.<sup>1</sup> Where civil society is concerned, this hybridity is also apparent in terms of how the Russian authorities treat domestic NGOs.<sup>2</sup> On the one hand, since 2010 the state has stepped up its efforts to promote collaboration between the federal and regional authorities and certain categories of NGO, namely those deemed to be working in areas such as the provision of social and cultural services which align with the interests of the state.<sup>3</sup> This collaboration has involved creating a registry of “socially-oriented” organizations, distributing direct federal and regional grants amongst this category of NGO, and improving the legal framework for them to participate in tenders for government and municipal service

---

<sup>1</sup> Matthijs Bogaards. 2009. “How to classify hybrid regimes? Defective democracy and electoral authoritarianism.” *Democratization*, 2 (16): 399-423; Henry E. Hale. 2010. “Eurasian politics as hybrid regimes: The case of Putin’s Russia.” *Journal of Eurasian Studies*, 1: 33-41.

<sup>2</sup> Françoise Daucé. 2014. “The Government and Human Rights Groups in Russia: Civilized Oppression?” *Journal of Civil Society*, 3 (10): 239-254.

<sup>3</sup> Irina Krasnopolskaya, Yuliia Skokova and Ulla Pape. 2015. “Government-Nonprofit Relations in Russia’s Regions: An Exploratory Analysis.” *Voluntas*, 6 (6): 2238-2266.

contracts.<sup>4</sup> On the other hand, a set of newly adopted laws, the best-known of which is the “Foreign Agents” law of 2012, has introduced restrictions on those NGOs which receive funding from abroad, forcing them to undergo onerous official checks and to register themselves as “foreign agents” or risk large fines and the suspension of their activity.<sup>5</sup> Given that the law thus far has been used primarily (although not exclusively) against NGOs working on human rights and environmental issues, it has been seen as a campaign of “administrative oppression” against those civil society groups deemed to be pursuing interests which run counter to those of the state.<sup>6</sup>

A further issue which is seen as complicating the position of NGOs in Russia is the impact of the legacy of Russia’s Soviet and immediate post-Soviet experience on domestic civil society development. Civil society was essentially nonexistent in the Soviet Union because the state controlled many aspects of social life, and the need for civic groups to address citizens’ concerns and interests was not recognized.<sup>7</sup> The majority of NGOs which then appeared during and after *perestroika* in the late 1980s and early 1990s were either Soviet-era organizations, such as veterans’ groups, or those that supported people with disabilities, which repackaged themselves as civic organizations, but retained close ties with the state<sup>8</sup> or were established and supported by foreign donors. As a result, in Russia and other countries emerging from state socialist regimes, a small and isolated community of professional advocacy NGOs dependent largely on Western donors developed alongside a larger number of non-governmental groups which had to rely on the authorities for technical and financial support.<sup>9</sup> As Dill argues, in the context of post-socialism “fiscal and political realities have anchored the role of the state as a major source of funding and legitimacy for nongovernmental organizations, precluding an independent nonprofit sector.”<sup>10</sup>

In this article we explore the ways in which NGOs working in the social sector in Russia manage their relationships with the authorities and consider how their activities are structured, their role within the policy process, and the extent to which they have opportunities to influence the implementation and direction of social policy in the regions where they operate. Using empirical data from interviews conducted with NGOs in the major Russian cities of Samara and St. Petersburg, we argue that interaction with state agencies is unavoidable for NGOs working in the sphere of child protection, yet may also offer them some opportunities to act as policy entrepreneurs within their specific policy network. These opportunities are, however, contingent upon their success in building credibility for themselves and developing a consensual, rather than oppositional, stance in relation to the local authorities.

---

<sup>4</sup> Vladimir Benevolenski. 2014. “Tools of Government for Support of SONPOs in Russia: In Search of Cross-Sector Cooperation in the Delivery of Social Services.” National Research University Higher School of Economics Basic Research Program Working Papers, 17: 1-22.

<sup>5</sup> RIA Novosti. 2014. “Federalnyi zakon 121 ob inostrannykh agentakh,” 16 June. <http://ria.ru/spravka/20140616/1011656413.html> (accessed on 10 November 2015).

<sup>6</sup> Daucé. 2014: 239-254.

<sup>7</sup> C.J. Albertie. 2004. “A Survey & Critique of Russian Law & Its Effects on NGOs.” *International Journal of Civil Society Law*, 2: 12, 14.

<sup>8</sup> Anna Tarasenko and Meri Kulmala. 2015. “Veteranskie organizatsii kak zainteresovannye gruppy: vozmozhnosti i ogranicheniia klientelizma dlia zashchity sotsial’nykh prav v regionakh Rossii.” Center for the Study of Modernisation Preprint M-42/15, European University St Petersburg. [http://eu.spb.ru/images/M\\_center/Tarasenko\\_Kulmala\\_working\\_paper\\_2015.pdf](http://eu.spb.ru/images/M_center/Tarasenko_Kulmala_working_paper_2015.pdf) (accessed on 13 April 2016).

<sup>9</sup> Sarah Henderson. 2003. *Building Democracy in Contemporary Russia: Western Support for Grassroots Organizations*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press; Lisa McIntosh Sundstrom. 2005. “Foreign Assistance, International Norms, and NGO development: Lessons from the Russian Campaign.” *International Organization*, 59: 419-449; Julie Hemment. 2012. “Nashi, Youth Voluntarism and Potemkin NGOs: Making sense of civil society in post-Soviet Russia.” *Slavic Review*, 2(71): 234-260.

<sup>10</sup> Anne Dill. 2014. “Health Care and Disability NGOs in Croatia: State Relations, Privatization, and Professionalism in an Emerging Field.” *Voluntas*, 25: 1195.

## Policy Entrepreneurship

The idea of close cooperation between NGOs operating in the field of social policy and state institutions, and of such NGOs functioning as direct providers of social services, is nothing new. As Bode<sup>11</sup> points out, this type of partnership between state and non-state actors in welfare governance has long been the norm in Continental Europe, while Salamon<sup>12</sup> and Rhodes<sup>13</sup> have traced the emergence of this “new” form of public governance in Anglo-Saxon countries since the early 1990s. More recently, scholars have begun to trace how this form of governance has begun to emerge in more authoritarian regimes such as those in Russia and China.<sup>14</sup> As Rhodes<sup>15</sup> points out, within this model of “network” governance, the boundaries between the public, private and voluntary sectors become increasingly blurred and policy networks involving both formal and informal relationships between state and non-state actors develop around particular issues or areas of public policymaking. Policies are developed through bargaining among the different members of the network and non-state actors, such as NGOs, join the network because they need “the money and legislative authority that only government can provide.”<sup>16</sup> Within the policymaking process surrounding a particular area of state social policy, Kingdon<sup>17</sup> argues that a “garbage can” model applies in which there are three components to the process of setting the agenda for action in that particular policy area: problems, policies and politics. While these streams generally function independently, policy issues will only get on the agenda when they are “coupled” and “a problem is recognized, a solution is available, and the political climate makes the time right for change.”<sup>18</sup>

In this context “policy entrepreneurs” emerge: persistent, well-connected members of a particular policy community who are perceived to have expertise relevant to that policy area but could be elected or appointed officials, or interested parties, such as NGOs or research organizations operating outside the formal government system.<sup>19</sup> They have a crucial role to play in ensuring that the streams are linked by framing and defining a policy problem in a particular way and presenting a credible solution to it in order to persuade policymakers to place an issue on the agenda.<sup>20</sup> Policy networks of actors who share an interest in a particular policy area thus serve as a vital forum for such entrepreneurs to present their definition of a problem and their corresponding solution to government actors, build coalitions with these actors and shape the terms of the policy debate and the appropriate policy responses that are identified.<sup>21</sup> Muccioni,<sup>22</sup> however, cautions against applying Kingdon’s garbage can model, which was developed in the specific context of the U.S. policymaking process, wholesale to other polities and emphasizes the

---

<sup>11</sup> Ingo Bode. 2011. “Creeping Marketization and Post-corporatist Governance.” in Susan Philips and Steven Smith, eds., *Governance and Regulation in the Third Sector*. New York, NY: Routledge.

<sup>12</sup> Lester M. Salamon. 1995. *Partners in Public Service: Government non-profit relations in the modern welfare state*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.

<sup>13</sup> Rod Rhodes. 1996. “The New Governance: Governing Without Government.” *Political Studies*, 46: 652-667.

<sup>14</sup> Krasnopolskaya et al. 2015: 2238-2266; Ingo Bode. 2014. “Towards a Neoliberal Third Sector? International Lessons from Recent Developments in China” in Matthias Freise and Thorsten Hallmann, eds., *Modernizing Democracy: Associations and Associating in the 21st Century*. New York: Springer.

<sup>15</sup> Rod Rhodes. 2007. “Understanding Governance: Ten Years On.” *Organization Studies*, (28:8): 1243-1264.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*: 1244.

<sup>17</sup> John W. Kingdon. 1984. *Agendas, Alternatives, and Public Policies*. Canada: Little, Brown and Company.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*: 93.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*: 129.

<sup>20</sup> Nancy C. Roberts and Paula J. King. 1991. “Policy Entrepreneurs: Their Activity Structures and Function in the Policy Process.” *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory*, 1(2): 159.

<sup>21</sup> Michael Mintrom. 1997. “Policy Entrepreneurs and the Diffusion of Innovation.” *American Journal of Political Science*, 3(41): 738-770.

<sup>22</sup> Gary Mucciaroni. 1992. “The Garbage Can Model and the Study of Policy Making: A Critique.” *Polity*, 24(3): 459-482.

need to take into account political, economic and social structures which also influence which issues get on the agenda. In countries where institutions are more centralized, bureaucrats and other institutional actors which tend to be stable and are not subject to removal from office as elected officials are, have an important role to play in terms of whether or not issues reach the agenda in the first place. As a result, solutions advocated by policy entrepreneurs which do make it onto the agenda need to have a “good fit’ with the perceived needs and goals of policy makers.”<sup>23</sup> This is particularly important in the context of the policy area of child protection in Russia, where executive agencies, such as ministries at the federal and regional level, and committees and inspectorates underpinned by an extensive bureaucracy, dominate the field and administer the system.<sup>24</sup> As we argue below, the way in which this policy network is constituted in the Russian context creates some constraints for NGOs attempting to act as policy entrepreneurs, but also creates some opportunities for them to take up this role and promote the policy options they deem most appropriate.

While much of the existing literature on policy networks focuses on the policy process in systems conforming to a model of advanced liberal democracy, public policy making and windows of opportunity for potential policy entrepreneurs in hybrid/semi-authoritarian regimes of the type that Russia is generally seen as conforming to remains an under-explored area. Nevertheless, some scholars have explored the role of NGOs as policy entrepreneurs in the Chinese political system. Mertha,<sup>25</sup> for example, argues that those who were previously excluded from the policy making process in China, such as NGOs, activists and journalists, now play an active role in this process and its outcomes as they have learned to abide by the “rules of the game” and to operate within a system of “fragmented authoritarianism.” Within such a system policy change tends to take place incrementally and through bureaucratic bargaining,<sup>26</sup> while He and Thøgersen<sup>27</sup> argue that the Chinese government has been willing to open up some consultative space for NGOs and other civic groups in order to bolster the legitimacy of the state without in any way jeopardizing the Chinese Communist Party’s monopoly on political decision making. While the Chinese political system is more overtly authoritarian than the Russian system, the two cases nevertheless have some parallels. Under the centralized, semi-authoritarian system which has developed during President Putin’s tenure, the state operates largely autonomously from society at large and elites are insulated from the public.<sup>28</sup> At the same time, within Russia’s federalized system, governors have an important role to play in both ensuring social and economic stability in their regions and delivering votes to the political regime at the center.<sup>29</sup> Regional budgets are largely responsible for financing Russia’s extensive system of social services and benefits, including children’s homes, and social policy is perceived to be an important tool in ensuring regime stability.<sup>30</sup> As a result, Krasnopskaya and co-authors<sup>31</sup> argue that “regional administrations have decided to invest in grant programs to support non-profit organizations in order to strengthen their political legitimacy both in the opinion of the local

---

<sup>23</sup> Mucciaroni. 1992: 474.

<sup>24</sup> Sirostvo v Rossii: problem i puti ikh razresheniia. Issledovanie. 2011. Moscow: 49. [www.philanthropy.ru](http://www.philanthropy.ru) (accessed on 13 April 2016).

<sup>25</sup> Andrew Mertha. 2009. “Fragmented Authoritarianism 2.0’: Political Pluralization in the Chinese Policy Process.” *The China Quarterly*, 200: 996.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*: 995-1012.

<sup>27</sup> Baogang He and Stig Thøgersen. 2010. “Giving the People a Voice? Experiments with consultative authoritarian institutions in China.” *Journal of Contemporary China*, 19(66): 675.

<sup>28</sup> Samuel A. Greene. 2014. *Moscow in Movement: Power and Opposition in Putin’s Russia*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

<sup>29</sup> Gulnaz Sharafutdinova. 2010. “Subnational Governance in Russia: How Putin Changed the Contract with His Agents and the Problems It Created for Medvedev.” *Publius*, 4(40): 672-696.

<sup>30</sup> Thomas Remington, Irina Soboleva, Anton Sobolev and Mark Urnov. 2013. “Economic and Social Policy Trade-Offs in the Russian Regions: Evidence from Four Case Studies.” *Europe-Asia Studies*, 65(10): 1855-1876.

<sup>31</sup> Krasnopskaya at al. 2015: 2238-2266.

population and of the federal authorities.” In this way, socially-oriented NGOs now have opportunities to engage as participants in policy networks at the regional level which were previously much more limited.

### **Socially-oriented NGOs and Child Protection: The Policy Background**

While a federal-level funding scheme of presidential grants for civil society groups, including those working on social projects, was established in 2006, official attempts to involve NGOs more formally in the provision of social services in Russia were stepped up in 2010 with the passing of legislation aimed specifically at enhancing funding for socially-oriented NGOs and cooperation between the government and this type of organization.<sup>32</sup> In 2011 a state list (*reestr*) of socially oriented non-commercial organizations was established. The state currently offers three types of grants and subsidies for NGOs:

- subsidies supporting socially oriented NGOs at the expense of the federal budget;
- subsidies to cover utility payments made by NGOs and the rental of office space;
- targeted funding of NGOs by regional and municipal authorities.<sup>33</sup>

In 2011, in St. Petersburg, the list included 170 organizations; in 2012, the number grew to 215. A total of 364 projects were supported in 2011, and 384 in 2012.<sup>34</sup>

Since 2011 the federal government and regional authorities have been conducting grant competitions for “socially oriented” NGOs to take on the provision of certain social services traditionally provided by the state. NGOs specializing in child protection have frequently been successful in winning funding through such programs, and, alongside other socially-oriented organizations, can receive funding on either a competitive or uncontested basis from regional-level committees, such as the local Committee on Social Policy or the Committee on Youth Policy.<sup>35</sup> In addition, under new legislation passed in 2012, all levels of government must use small and medium enterprises and socially-oriented NGOs to provide 15 percent of the total annual value of their contracts for social service provision.<sup>36</sup> A further set of laws has been adopted more recently to increase (at least formally) the significance of NGOs as actors within the social policy system, and to improve the dialogue between state and non-state actors. The Federal Law of the Russian Federation No. 212 “On the foundations of public monitoring in the Russian Federation” (*Ob osnovakh obshchestvennogo kontrolya v Rossiiskoi Federatsii*) was signed on 21 July 2014. Some significant amendments were incorporated the same day (21 July 2014) into the Federal Law “On Public Associations” (*Ob obshchestvennykh ob’edineniyakh*). These laws prescribe the establishment of public oversight councils within different executive bodies, and the obligatory inclusion of NGOs as members of these councils.

The increasing involvement of socially-oriented NGOs in the provision of social services has had two major consequences. Firstly, the state has strengthened its control over non-state organizations acting in this sphere. Secondly, the state has made channels for cross-sectoral collaboration more open. These measures have undoubtedly had some influence on the independence of NGOs, but some researchers consider the effects of these recent legal initiatives to have certain positive implications for such organizations, particularly at the local level. For instance, in the case of St. Petersburg, Anna Tarasenko argues that the role of civic associations

---

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.: 2238-2266.

<sup>33</sup> Anna Tarasenko. 2013. “Analiz praktik podderzhki SO NKO po dannym reestra poluchatelei gosudarstvennoi podderzhki.” *Negosudarstvennye nekommercheskie organizatsii v Sankt-Peterburge*. SPb: TsRNO: 15.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Krasnopolskaya at al. 2015: 2238-2266.

<sup>36</sup> Benevolenski. 2014: 1-22.

in solving social problems has increased, although organizations working with high-priority vulnerable groups, such as war veterans, tend to be the most successful at gaining funding from the local authorities.<sup>37</sup> In addition, previous research conducted by one of the authors between 2011 and 2015 indicates that many socially-oriented NGOs, while recognizing the necessity of applying for and receiving state funding, nevertheless remain keen to defend their ability to operate as independently as possible. They also felt that their increasing involvement in public oversight councils and other interactions with the authorities had led to some positive developments in social policy and emphasized the importance of continuing this and other types of collaboration with local officials in particular.<sup>38</sup>

The sphere of child protection is an area of social policy which remains very much within the remit of the state. The current political discourse constructs the problem of child protection as one of the most important challenges for contemporary Russian society. This is hardly surprising given the number of children living without parental care: as of 2010, they numbered 731,000, with 260,000 of these living in long-term institutional care. While the federal government provides funding for these institutions, the allocation of this funding and the provision of social services in this area is largely the responsibility of regional and municipal authorities.<sup>39</sup> Interest in the topic increased sharply in mid-2012, partly due to the beginning of foster care reform in Russia, the main points of which were announced by the Order of the President of the Russian Federation No. 761 "On a National Strategy of Action for Children 2012 - 2017" (adopted on 1 June 2012).<sup>40</sup> Soon after, in September 2012 a "Coordinating Council on the Implementation of a National Strategy for Action for Children 2012-2017" was established.<sup>41</sup> The Council involved both state officials and leaders of the most influential NGOs in the sphere of child protection. Partly, interest in the problem of protecting children was prompted by an international scandal which took place between Russia and the U.S. in 2012 and which also attracted another wave of official interest in the problem of child protection. Law No. 272 "On measures against persons involved in violations of fundamental human rights and freedoms, rights and freedoms of citizens of Russian Federation", also known as the "Dima Yakovlev Law" was signed on 28 December 2012. The Law imposed a ban on the adoptions of Russian orphans by American citizens (Art. 4) and was passed in retaliation for the U.S. adoption of a law sanctioning Russian officials alleged to have been responsible for the death in custody of the lawyer Sergey Magnitskii. It was named after a Russian child who had been adopted by U.S. parents and died in 2008 due to negligence.<sup>42</sup> In January 2013 the United Russia party, which holds the majority of seats in Russia's parliament, initiated the project "Russia needs all its children" (*Rossii vazhen kazhdiy rebenok*) which was aimed at improving domestic adoption rates and living conditions for children in the care of the state.<sup>43</sup>

The problem of protecting children living without parental care is thus recognized as one which is both legitimate and extremely important at the state level. The national strategy defines the main aims of the state's policy towards the protection of children in care, which has become the conceptual basis for proposed reforms of the institutional and foster care systems:

---

<sup>37</sup> Tarasenko. 2013: 16.

<sup>38</sup> Eleanor Bindman. 2015. "The state, civil society and social rights in contemporary Russia." *East European Politics*, 3(31): 342-360.

<sup>39</sup> Sirotstvo v Rossii. 2011.

<sup>40</sup> No. 761 "On National Strategy of Action for Children 2012 – 2017."

<http://base.garant.ru/70183566/#friends#ixzz3oloLfpdg> (accessed on 3 May 2016).

<sup>41</sup> See the Provision on the Coordinating Council. <http://state.kremlin.ru/council/36/statute> (accessed on 13 April 2016).

<sup>42</sup> The Moscow News. 2012. "Russian parliament passes anti-US adoption law," 26 December.

<http://themoscownews.com/russia/20121226/191064431.html> (accessed on 2 December 2015).

<sup>43</sup> Edinaya Rossiya. 2012. "Rossii vazhen kazhdii rebionok." <https://er.ru/projects/rossii-vazhen-kazhdyj-rebenok/> (accessed on 2 December 2015).

- priority placed on family-based care for children currently living in state institutions;
- reform of institutions for orphaned children, including children with physical and learning disabilities;
- establishment of a system of post-institution support (*post-internat*).

The problem of child protection for those in care have also become part of the more general official discourse on demographic policy, the protection of motherhood, and traditional family values. In 2014, the "Concept on State Family Policy in the Russian Federation for the period until 2025" was adopted.<sup>44</sup> The concept indicates that a traditionalist view of "family values" has become a steady trend in the transformation of gender relations in modern Russia. Zhanna Chernova argues that in current public and political discourse "the traditional family model and patriarchal gender relations have become idealized."<sup>45</sup> A Concept adopted in 2007 declared the main principles and aims of the state's policy towards young families. In particular "the principle of continuity of the generations orientes the state and young families towards the preservation and maintenance of the relationship between the generations, respect and reproduction of traditions of family education in young families, and the transmission and continuity of Russian socio-cultural values."<sup>46</sup> It also interprets the aim of state policy toward young families as "strengthening the institution of the Russian family on the basis of people's traditional socio-cultural values, spirituality and local way of life."<sup>47</sup>

Since the very beginning of the 1990s, NGOs have played a significant role in the sphere of child protection in Russia. The structure of Russia's institutional care system for children offers rather broad opportunities for such organizations to assist in this area. Every stage of the process of placing a child in this system has a place for NGO activity such as: working with mothers who have abandoned their children, with "problem" (*neblagopoluchnaia*) families, and with adopting families. NGOs also support children in shelters and children's homes, and after they leave the care system.<sup>48</sup> Leaders of NGOs, such as the Foundation to Support Children in Difficult Life Circumstances<sup>49</sup> (also known as the Marina Gordeeva Foundation) and the National Foundation for the Prevention of Cruelty Against Children<sup>50</sup> (previously: Assistance to Russian Orphans (ARO)), are involved in federal public councils, which advise the president and monitor the implementation of the National Strategy on Action for Children.<sup>51</sup> Approximately 30 private and corporate charity foundations provide financial support for children in the care system: these include *Viktoriia*, *Rasprav' kryl'ia*, and others. Some foundations do not have their own equity, but fundraise instead: *Otkazniki*, *Detskie domiki*, and various others.<sup>52</sup> Some of the federal-level NGOs have a substantial volume of opportunities to deliver services, and may be regarded as implementers of state social policy. Some of them are included in the federal Public Chamber (*Obshchestvennaia Palata*), or other public councils at the federal level. There are more than 1,000 NGOs and charity foundations which deal solely with problems in the care system functioning at the regional level.<sup>53</sup>

<sup>44</sup> Zhanna Chernova. 2010. "Molodaia semia kak ob'ekt/sub'ekt semeinoi politiki." *Polit.ru*, 30 November. <http://polit.ru/article/2010/11/30/family/> (accessed on 12 March 2015).

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> No. AF-163/06 "On Conception of the State Policy Towards Young Family," 8 May 2007.

[http://ivo.garant.ru/#/basesearch/концепция государственной политики в отношении молодой семьи:0](http://ivo.garant.ru/#/basesearch/концепция%20государственной%20политики%20в%20отношении%20молодой%20семьи:0) (accessed on 20 December 2015).

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Sirotstvo v Rossii. 2011.

<sup>49</sup> <http://www.fond-detyam.ru/>.

<sup>50</sup> [www.nfpcc.ru](http://www.nfpcc.ru).

<sup>51</sup> For example, the Coordinating Council on Implementation of the "National Strategy for Action for Children 2012-2017".

<sup>52</sup> Sirotstvo v Rossii. 2011.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

## Description of the Field Research

The empirical research this article is based on was conducted as part of an international research project on “Network governance: A tool for understanding Russian policy-making?” During the field research, 50 interviews were conducted with experts (researchers, politicians, and journalists), officials at different levels, and the heads of NGOs in St.Petersburg, Samara and Moscow. In this article we use data from interviews with 9 NGOs (3 in Samara, 4 in St.Petersburg, and 2 in Moscow with NGOs functioning at the federal level), and also some expert interviews in which the particular problems of cooperation between NGOs and governmental bodies were discussed.

NGOs working in the sphere of child protection in Russia are numerous and diverse. During the field research, we sought to collect materials about different NGOs, from local volunteer organizations to groups functioning at the federal level, in order to tease out tendencies in their relations with the state and operational conditions which might be the same or similar for different NGOs. In preparing a list of informants, we tried to select the most active and well-known NGOs in the two regions. To identify informants, we used the results of participant observation of regional cross-sectoral meetings, and preliminary expert interviews with regional researchers, journalists, and politicians. In terms of the type of NGO profiled in this study, a number of scholars have reviewed the type, structure, and scope of Russia’s NGOs, and, despite using different labels, their characterizations are similar, with each researcher identifying three specific types of organization.<sup>55</sup> The researchers highlight grassroots organizations which focus their campaigning activity almost exclusively on local or single issues; professional policy or advocacy organizations whose members are often drawn further into the international NGO circuit through conferences and training overseas; and government affiliates or GONGOs, which are closely linked to the operations of the state.<sup>56</sup> The following NGOs took part in this research project:

Samara:

Charity foundation *Radost’ [Happiness]*. The organization declares its mandate to be primarily charitable, although members of this NGO are involved in many different types of activities, including local politics. The leader of this NGO is a member of the regional Public Chamber, and also heads a special section of the Samara regional legislature, which is open for discussions among state and non-state actors. In some senses, the organization acts as a professional NGO.

*Domiki Detstva [Childhood Homes]* is a relatively new NGO which first appeared as a volunteer organization several years ago. The organization focuses on developing its own projects, and its leader is included in many formal and informal collaborative networks between state and non-state actors. According to Cook and Vinogradova’s typology, this NGO falls under the definition of a grassroots organization.

St. Petersburg:

Non-state children’s home *Derevni SOS [Village SOS]*. This is one of several children’s villages which operate in different regions of Russia and other countries around the world. The NGO has a foreign founder and has operated in St. Petersburg since 2000. The NGO is not a grassroots Russian organization, nor does it act as a professional NGO. The cross-

---

<sup>55</sup> Jo Crotty. 2009. “Making A Difference? NGOs and Civil Society Development in Russia.” *Europa-Asia Studies*, 1(61): 90.

<sup>56</sup> Linda Cook and Elena Vinogradova. 2006. “NGOs and Social Policy-Making in Russia’s Regions.” *Problems of Post-Communism*, 5(53): 28-41; Laura Henry. 2006. “Shaping Social Activism in Post-Soviet Russia: Leadership, Organizational Diversity and Innovation.” *Post-Soviet Affairs*, 2(22): 99-124.

regional charity Russian Committee on SOS Children's Villages, which is the umbrella organization leading all 6 SOS Children's Villages in Russia, does, however, function as a professional NGO.

*Vrachi detiam [Doctors for Children]* – A highly skilled professional NGO, acting in St. Petersburg since 2001, when it was established by volunteers of the international humanitarian organization "The Right to Health." At present the organization provides professional social services and develops different projects on child protection, including protection of orphans and children at risk. The staff of this organization consists of professional social workers, psychologists, doctors, and speech therapists.

*Partniorstvo kazhdomu rebionku [Partnership for Every Kid]* – A professional NGO with extensive experience in developing social projects and advocacy activities, and the provision of professional social services. At the end of the 1990s the organization was established in St. Petersburg as the Russian branch of the UK organization Every Child, and worked under this name until 2009. The staff consists of professional social workers, psychologists, doctors, and speech therapists.

*Roditel'skii most [Parents' Bridge]* appeared as a civic organization in the mid-1980s. It is focused on charitable activities and is well-known in both St. Petersburg and Russia more widely for working with foster families, and actively improving adoption rates.

In addition to the interviews, we conducted participant-observation of various types of cross-sectoral communication. These included meetings of councils, teams, and working groups. In selecting events to observe, we were guided by our goal of observing communication and practices of collaboration between state and non-state actors. We tried to select the best-known fora and during the meetings we paid attention to spatial segregation, the distribution of roles and credentials, the general tone of the conversation, topics suggested for discussion, and the dynamics of the discussion. In coming to the meetings we had a chance not only to observe, but also to communicate with other participants. Some of the talks were recorded and transcripts analyzed. The talks gave us information not only about how this communication took place, but also provided stories about successful or failed collaborations, and about the dynamics of relations between state and non-state actors. We observed the following fora for cross-sectoral communication:

1. Public Chamber in Samara;
2. Council on problems of fatherhood, motherhood and childhood at Samara City Duma;
3. Expert Council of the Children's Ombudsman, St. Petersburg;
4. Open city supervision, organized by the NGO *Partniorstvo kazhdomu rebionku* in St. Petersburg.<sup>57</sup>

---

<sup>57</sup> *The Public Chamber in Samara* is a state institution relevant for all three policy areas covered in this article. The chamber formally has independent status, but the selection process of candidates and the way the chamber operates links it closely to the authorities. Its proclaimed purpose is to ensure public oversight over the executive and legislative branches, and public participation in governance. The chamber is subdivided into a number of commissions which at times also raise public discussion on issues concerning the three policy areas. This heightens attention to said issues among media and decision-makers, and the chamber sometimes gives policy recommendations. The main emphasis of the public chamber is on giving advice to the authorities, particularly by calling the attention of the authorities to specific problems, and monitoring. It has quite weak potential for coordination of different sectors and institutions. Members are generally considered loyal to the state and ready to compromise, and the chamber has rather close links to the regional governor. Implementation of social policy is not part of the functions of the chamber, and it has no *decision-making* power.

*The Samara city parliament's Council on problems of fatherhood, motherhood and childhood* was established in 2013 as a response to the need for an arena to discuss problems related to child welfare. Council members include officials, heads of children's homes, the Children's Ombudsman, and NGO representatives. The council is headed

**Discussion: “It always has to come from above, there is no sense in starting from the bottom”<sup>58</sup>**

Our interviews with the leaders of various NGOs in Samara and St. Petersburg indicate that the main and, indeed, only possible way for sustainable development of NGOs in the sphere of child protection is close cooperation with the authorities. In this section, we will consider precisely how NGOs approach cooperation with the authorities; which formats of cross-sectoral communication are available to NGOs and representatives of the authorities; the efforts which should be made by NGOs to operate in the field and to improve their own independent projects; and the results which may be achieved by NGOs in the conditions of contemporary Russia.

*Cross-sectoral collaboration: a façade of democratic governance, or new chances for policy entrepreneurship?*

The contemporary legal field creates specific spaces for communication between the authorities and NGOs, with the Law “On the origins of public control in Russian Federation” prescribing the establishment of “instruments of public oversight,” or expert councils, in all regions, at all levels of executive power, and in regional legislative bodies. Execution of the law is uneven in different regions and at different levels of authority, although in the Samara region during the last two years, these councils have been established in all the main governmental bodies of the city and the region, including the city Duma, the Samara regional Duma, and the regional ministry for social demography and family policy. In addition, dozens of different public councils and special working groups have been established at the lower levels of executive power: these are open to NGOs, and some are even managed by the leaders of NGOs. All the NGOs which took part in the research stressed the availability and importance of participating in these public councils. Belonging to a public council does not in and of itself guarantee

---

by an NGO leader. Meetings are held 4-5 times a year and typically consist of reports made by specialists on specific problems and subsequent discussion, followed by recommendations as to how the issue should be resolved. The advice function of the policy system is therefore highlighted. While not decision-makers as such, the council produces recommendations that legislators and policy-makers are required to consider, though not obliged to follow. Coordination is a key task of the council. It coordinates activities and ideas among officials, specialists, and NGOs. The council is not involved in the direct implementation of social policy; neither does it have a formal monitoring function.

*The Expert council under St. Petersburg’s Children’s Ombudsman* This council is intended to facilitate discussion of different problems related to child welfare. Participation is rather flexible. There is a set of core members, but external experts are also invited when certain issues are being discussed. Participants include officials, experts, politicians, and NGOs. The agenda is set by the Ombudsman apparatus. The council has decision-making authority; the decisions are recorded in protocols and it is obligatory for executive organs to implement them. The advisory function is important—the council produces recommendations addressed directly to the executive organs. It also coordinates the solution of particular problems raised for discussion. The status of these recommendations is quite high, and the council can thereby have an important influence on how social policy is implemented, though indirectly (through recommendations rather than direct involvement in policy implementation). Its monitoring role consists in observing the implementation of its decisions and recommendations, and reporting to the mayor and executive organs about the decisions.

*Child welfare supervisions, St. Petersburg* is a regular open event organized by the NGO “Partniorstvo” in St. Petersburg. The state is involved through the participation of municipal guardianship departments, social workers, and other representatives of the municipal services. NGO representatives and international experts also participate in the supervisions. Supervisions are a monthly forum for discussing social problems, usually by focusing on individual cases with general applicability. The arena produces advice on how to improve the skills of practitioners, e.g. in working with orphans, families, and children with specific problems. The advice given does not have to be taken into account, but may influence both the norms of social work practice, as well as practitioners’ professional standards. Supervisions play a relatively important role in coordination of solutions of the above-mentioned problems. The forum monitors and evaluates the usefulness of the recommendations that they produce in the meetings, through repeated participation of the same participants.

<sup>58</sup> From the interview with St. Petersburg’s *Vrachi detiam*.

participation in administrative decision-making, and a public council may not produce any decisions at all, but the opportunity to take part provides a channel of communication between NGOs and the authorities, and is valued on its own merit.

Meanwhile, according to the interviews, the legal field establishes the order in which cross-sectoral collaboration takes place and the distribution of roles among the participants. According to one of our respondents:

We can say and write anything—for example that we are establishing independent public structures. But still you need to realize that objectively the forums are functioning *in* the government. This means they are all consensus structures and they were established with the purpose of finding consensus. People practicing constructive approaches to interaction with the authorities must take part there. Not those who are oriented toward confrontation or contradiction, but those who have another vision of the problem, other ideas about how to deal with them, but with the desire to reach an agreement (Public Chamber in Samara).

Participation in meetings of the public councils or other such platforms facilitates communication between members of NGOs, policymakers, and politicians. Decision-making in these fora appears, based on the interviews, to be a complex, non-linear process, with regular discussions helping to gather ideas and issues in need of resolution. Reaching a decision requires many different components, including in-depth research of the problem, an initiative group formed of specialists, which meets within the framework of the local public chamber or a public oversight council within the regional legislature, and the opportunity to engage with local politicians. One interviewee, who was both the head of an NGO promoting foster care and a member of the Samara regional Duma's Working Group on Parenthood and Childhood, described the discussion process which usually took place at meetings of her group:

Various officials take part in our work, including representatives of the [regional] Ministry for Demographic Development; they are always there. Representatives of the State Duma who work on community issues also always come, and people from the regional Duma, the regional governor's office, and, if necessary, from the regional Ministry for Health. **Then of course there** are all those who represent non-governmental organizations which work with children. We develop recommendations for amending the relevant legislation and so on—it's not simply a box-ticking exercise, these are vital questions (Samara City Duma Council).

Another respondent was also positive about the work of such fora in terms of influencing the development of regional social policy:

The Public Chamber gives us an additional forum through which we can engage. We work with whoever is in power, we are very pragmatic. We should be using any opportunity we have to express our opinion and the Public Chamber is a high-level body, it gives us more access to those in power and, over time, our relationship with them has grown closer. It's a really good new forum for us that we've had for six years now and they do listen to us (Public Chamber in Samara).

In terms of specific policy developments, this same respondent talked about a project run by their organization which sought to increase the number of free places in kindergartens available for children from young families. An initiative group at the Samara Public Chamber put a great deal of effort into implementing the project over a number of years, but it only really moved forward when a new (and ultimately successful) mayoral candidate was made aware of it:

We always used to invite the previous mayors to our conferences and so on, they would always say “yes, yes, yes” but nothing would happen. Then, when we were in the process

of electing Azarov,<sup>59</sup> he came to the [Samara Oblast] Public Chamber to tell us about his election manifesto. We said our project was a priority, one which should be included in his manifesto. It was included... and they started to build more kindergartens, we saw them ourselves in Samara (Public Chamber in Samara).

In communicating and investigating particular problems together, state and non-state actors may organize working groups, which strive to solve problems as a single force. During such interactions, the boundaries between the state and non-state actors seem to disappear. Such foundations as efficiency, dealing with the bureaucratic apparatus, and the common goal of making the lives of children better, appear to be much more significant.

Some cases in our research show how people can move from one sector to another:

Q.: Why have you moved from the state service to a non-governmental organization?

A.: I interacted with them [NGOs], even when I worked for the municipality, well ... It happened so easily. I feel comfortable in these working conditions, and see a lot of opportunities to realize myself creatively. We are not exhausted here. That is, when we are preparing the project, in principle, we know the problem, and we ourselves are looking for solutions. We are free in it. That is interesting (Samara's Charity foundation *Radost*).

People like this are extremely valuable for the NGOs since they know the formal and informal rules of collaboration with the state agencies, they maintain their informal contacts in the state agencies, and became a valuable conductor of cross-sectoral communication.

Where the St. Petersburg case study is concerned, the number of public councils is considerably fewer in comparison with Samara. Nevertheless, communication between NGOs and the local authorities is equally important. Leaders of NGOs try to use the platforms available to them for communication with state actors. According to interviews conducted in St. Petersburg, the regional public chamber, child ombudsman, or even platforms at the federal level can act as spaces in which strategic or particularly urgent questions can be addressed to the authorities in general, or to specific officials:

Since 2010 the [St. Petersburg] Committee on Social Policy has given out a subsidy which covers your expenses in terms of feeding children and providing them with clothes, but there is not any specific law which sets a mandatory amount or which is calculated on the basis of the number of children needing care. So every year this decision has to be taken in a particular way, in accordance with the current legislation and mechanism of law drafting. Every year we are forced to appeal to the [regional] Child Ombudsman so that she will remind the officials on the Committee of our existence (Non-state children's home *Derevni SOS*).

In both regions, communication with the authorities is recognized as an integral part of the strategic work done by NGOs working on child protection. Indeed, according to our interviewees, the success and sustainable development of particular NGO projects depends entirely on communication with the authorities. Often the issue of financial support is a key aspect of this relationship. In the current situation, the state's federal and regional grant and subsidy programs are the main—and frequently the only—source of project funding available to this type of NGO. Nevertheless, success in competing for such funding is by no means guaranteed, making fundraising one of the most complicated aspects of NGO activity:

We have written applications for a variety of grants, including government and presidential schemes. However, grant funding has its pros and cons. The downside is that you do not know whether you will receive the grant or not, how big it will be, whether you have a subsidy or not, when it will be announced, and when the money will arrive. And the most

---

<sup>59</sup> Dmitriy Igorevich Azarov, the United Russia mayoral candidate, was elected mayor of Samara in October 2010 and served until 2014.

important thing is that subsidies cover the organization's expenses. It means that first the organization has to find the means to provide services throughout the year. And only then can it request reimbursement of expenses. So we must constantly and actively work to raise funds, which of course takes a lot of time and effort (St. Petersburg's *Partniorstvo kazhdomu rebionku*).

Leaders and members of NGOs argue that successful work by NGOs protecting children in today's Russia is impossible without close communication with authorities. However, leaders of NGOs tend to interpret the current transformations in the legal and social policy fields in two ways. From one side, the penetration of the state into the projects and activities of NGOs is understood as a violation of their independence. From the other side, NGOs tend to see the "domestication" of NGOs as an invitation for collaboration, which, while it may be nominal and formal, may also bring real results in solving problems.

Policy networks surrounding child protection are active on formal and informal levels. Active members of NGOs have a wide variety of opportunities for meetings and discussions with state actors at different forums. Informal communication between state actors and NGO representatives helps solve everyday problems, and helps to form a common vision of particular difficulties. Although the formal participation of non-state actors in official platforms, like public chambers or councils, creates the chance to develop strategic recommendations, and access to policy making, it still entails a lot of barriers—including enormous bureaucracy, the complicated structure of ministries and distribution of responsibilities, legal restrictions, and the necessity of waiting for the appropriate moment to propose recommendations.

Among state actors, we include low-level executive branch officials: officers and heads of executive departments. They are the state partners who are available for negotiations. The boundary between state and non-state actors at this level is permeable. Former officials may turn into NGO activists, and vice versa. State and non-state actors may combine their efforts to achieve common goals. Any state actor has access to the "vertical of power," meaning that he can get in touch with higher level officials. They can act as providers of programs and give suggestions to their superiors. Meanwhile, in one way or another, these low level executive officials suffer from the same barriers that the NGOs face.

### *Improvement of NGO projects*

According to our interviews, any long-term project, which needs sustainable financial support to survive, must be funded by the authorities. Some NGOs use a proactive approach, discussing potential projects with officials before they have started. Here the NGOs often have to find a compromise between their own project and the needs of the state social service system. This process involves not only close collaboration with the authorities, but also the expectation that the NGO will provide a service which in some way conforms to the aims of state social policy. One of our respondents explained how their NGO had managed to persuade the municipal authorities to finance their project:

In 2006 we opened the city's first social hostel for minors, and initially we made contact with the administration of the Kalinin district [in St. Petersburg]. We told them "we are going to apply to one of our donors with a project. If you are willing to provide the premises, we are willing to repair it, educate the staff, and support this project for the first two years. After two years, are you prepared to finance this hostel from the municipal budget?" And, in fact, that's how it was opened (*Vrachi detiam*).

Achieving this kind of funding is, however, complicated by the fact that child protection in the care system is managed by several different ministries and other bodies at the federal and regional level. A project may be rejected by one ministry, even if several others strongly support

the project, but approval is required from all the relevant ministries whose responsibilities may be affected by the project:

Even if the Committee on Social Policy supports us, there is the Committee on Finance. And the Committee on Social Policy has to explain to the Committee on Finance why such a big budget item should be approved. This means the Committee on Finance has to really want to understand what the project is trying to achieve, and the Committee on Social Policy needs to really explain this properly. And if this is not a priority for any of them personally, the chances that someone will be willing to justify it and the others to listen is very small. So there are a lot of conditions (St. Petersburg's *Partniorstvo kazhdomu rebionku*).

If an NGO wants to initiate an independent project, which has not been agreed with the authorities in advance, developing the project is a difficult and time-consuming process. According to our interview with the head of the NGO *Partniorstvo*, her organization wanted to extend a social program it offered for families with disabled children called "Breathing Space" [*Peredyshka*]. The program initially offered a service for parents who are unable to leave their children without care, even for a short period of time, and was established to train specialists who could stand in for parents of children with severe disabilities for a certain period of time in order to give the parents a break. The service is provided by the NGO for free, and they make considerable efforts to maintain its availability. Finding regular funding for this program is one of the NGO's main concerns, as it also runs various other projects and the problem of finding financial support for "Breathing Space" has to be resolved each year. According to our interview, the NGO engaged in advocacy activities and made a big effort to improve the program:

We use all available opportunities to improve this service. In the Gordeeva Foundation competition, we had three minutes to prove the necessity of this program. We did it, and we won. We needed to publish an article in the foundation's newsletter, and we did that too. We sit in the Public Chamber and observe what is happening there (St. Petersburg's *Partniorstvo kazhdomu rebionku*).

The program gained support on many levels: the President, the Legislative Assembly, and the Regional Committee on Social Policy confirmed the importance of the program. Breathing Space was included in the president's program from 1 June 2012.<sup>60</sup> However, until now the program has not been included in the list of mandatory programs financed by the state budget. Money for the program comes through different charitable channels, including on-line donations.<sup>61</sup> Since September 2015, the Committee for press and cooperation with the media in the Government of St. Petersburg has supported Breathing Space with public announcements and media coverage (See Figure 1).

---

<sup>60</sup> No. 761 "On National Strategy of Action for Children 2012 – 2017," 5:4  
<http://base.garant.ru/70183566/#friends#ixzz3oloLfpdg> (accesses on 3 May 2016).

<sup>61</sup> See the website of the program: <http://peredishka.ru/donate>.



Figure 1. Example of a poster provided by the St. Petersburg government to support the NGO Breathing Space. The inscription on the poster reads: Irina and Dmitriy are visiting a café for the first time in 5 years, having entrusted the care of their child to a professional family.

Meanwhile, the leaders of NGOs recognize the connection between budgetary funding and independence. Some of them regard government funding as a partial benefit, which may entail both positive and negative consequences:

Q: Is full governmental funding desirable for your NGO?

A: This is a moot point. From the perspective of sustainable development—yes. From the viewpoint of control—no. Because we have all the checks by the prosecutor's office, sanitary and epidemiological stations, fire inspections, tax inspections already now [the NGO is partly funded by the state – E.B.]. ... Because we also communicate with colleagues from organizations, and we see that they're inundated with paperwork. Planning, reporting, etc. Thank God, we can minimize the paperwork that we do. Because we do not work with papers, we work with children. Therefore, when it comes to funding from the state, there is a risk that the state will climb all over everything and tell us “where we must plant pansies, and where roses” (St. Petersburg’s Non-state children’s home *Derevni SOS*).

Russia’s existing laws create opportunities for direct collaboration between NGOs and state bodies. Since 2012, St. Petersburg has regularly held competitions among NGOs for the implementation of state programs. In the event of winning one of these competitions, the NGO assumes the function of providing services on behalf of the state social system. From one perspective, this could mean the total loss of independence for such organizations. However, empirical research shows that NGOs may combine the execution of state powers with their own projects, and still understand themselves as a part of civil society.

It is impossible to identify NGOs which are solely managing their own projects or solely executing state social programs. One NGO may have a “state” project which provides the NGO with a certain stability—not only financial stability, but also legitimizing its activities in general. During the period of that project, the NGO may develop its own projects which bring something new to the state social welfare system, rather than simply assisting state bodies in running their own services.

Different NGOs practice cooperation with state bodies on different levels: from simple communication to the execution of state social services. Nevertheless, none of these strategies

means the rejection of independence and membership in civil society. In trying to preserve some autonomy, NGOs devise and implement complex strategies to deliver their own projects. Both being proactive and involved in advocacy assumes close interaction with the state, although these two strategies have conceptual differences. Implementing independent projects supports the status of an NGO as a subject of social policy, whereas a proactive approach is more likely to turn NGOs into executors of state social programs. This latter strategy is much better suited for the political and legal conditions of contemporary Russia.

*Positioning of NGOs in dialogue with the authorities: the construction of the “right” reputation, being in opposition, and the price of consensus*

In order to develop the type of formal and informal relationships with local officials which can support their work and to be viewed by the authorities as a respectable and serious partner, NGOs operating in the social sphere must develop their reputation as credible providers of expertise and/or service. Indeed, according to our interviews, reputation is a significant component of a successfully functioning NGO:

This is an important part of, simply, the economic survival of the organization. In order to enable it to compete with other non-profit organizations, it must prove that it is doing something socially significant. Or it should do something politically significant, well, for the state (Center\_Family\_SPb).

As part of its efforts to maintain a credible reputation, one of the NGOs we interviewed organizes regular meetings.<sup>62</sup> Usually the authorities do not take part in supervising these events. However, the staff of municipal guardianship departments, social workers, and other specialists from municipal services or NGOs do participate. Supervision is always managed by members of *Partniorstvo*, with the leader of the evaluation always positioned as an expert. This evaluation process helps to construct and support the group’s image as a professional expert NGO, and it also improves the popularity and significance of *Partniorstvo*—another important way of maximizing contacts with state bodies.

Personal contacts with officials and a history of working for state structures provides another benefit—knowledge of how to communicate with state agencies. This knowledge is singled out as a particularly specific and important skill which defines the success of the NGO and cross-sectoral collaboration. Some specialist knowledge is needed to prepare applications and take financial support from the state (which is now, in fact, virtually the only legitimate source of support in Russia): “we act as an administrative resource for them. As a rule, they do not know how to write applications, somehow they cannot do that. In-person work with people is what they do. So we help them” (Samara’s Charity foundation *Radost*’).

The strategies of successful and developed NGOs are predetermined by the goal of interacting efficiently with the state authorities. Based on the findings of this research, we can identify some of the most important skills: knowing how to craft the “right” reputation for the NGO; formulating requests or suggestions correctly; and understanding how and when to present an idea. Each of these components requires its own hidden knowledge. Thus, constructing the reputation of an NGO involves a number of activities: conferences, round tables, meetings, and membership in different networks and councils. NGOs value each opportunity for public presentation, and try to do it in the best possible way: “[if] I do not have time to prepare a ‘smart’ presentation, I would rather cancel my participation” (Samara’s Charity foundation *Radost*’).

Forming a proper reputation in the eyes of the authority entails NGOs competing for resources. One’s reputation is constructed through the process of communication with the authorities—and

---

<sup>62</sup> Regular open child welfare supervision organized by NGO “*Partniorstvo*” in St. Petersburg.

also, primarily, *for* the authorities. NGOs regard the construction of a proper reputation as a very important component of their work, one that requires a serious investment of effort.

There is no single formula for crafting the reputation of an NGO, but analyses of interviews suggest several key components. Constructing a credible reputation definitely requires tolerance toward current state social policy and a willingness to compromise with the authorities. The NGO has to have skills in communicating with the authorities, using the language and rules shared by the authorities. In this sense, certain Russian NGOs find themselves in a similar position to the Chinese NGOs described by Mertha,<sup>63</sup> in that abiding by the established “rules of the game” may offer them more opportunity to influence policy development than acting in opposition to the existing political regime. Having a reputation as a professional NGO providing unique social services gives the organization the opportunity to be included in cross-sectoral networks. Participation in these networks in turn gives the NGO a better chance (which is still quite modest) of influencing political decisions. A final important component of reputation is that the NGO must be perceived to be efficient, and establishing efficiency in the current situation again requires close collaboration with the authorities.

In constructing the “right” reputation, NGOs seek to maximize their contact with the authorities. They use different methods to create a mutual interest between themselves and state social services. NGOs have regular contact with the authorities, but they also try to stimulate the interest of state social services in the NGOs by organizing their own platforms for communication, such as the open city supervision in St. Petersburg, or the special section at the regional Duma in Samara. Professionalism is what may attract the attention of the authorities here. Efforts made by the NGOs to construct a proper reputation for themselves may, however, erase the boundary between the government and NGOs. To be successful and efficient, NGOs are forced to demonstrate values such as, for example, accountability or loyalty, which are much more important among state actors than within civil society. The porous border between state and non-state actors may, in certain cases, give the NGOs access to the mechanisms of governance, which would hardly be available normally to non-governmental organizations. By maximizing contact with the authorities, NGOs receive certain benefits that allow them to develop their independent projects, but this process can require an organization to make certain compromises which have implications for its activities and sometimes for its very survival, as the example below demonstrates.

In the aftermath of recent legal changes, one of our respondents, the SOS Village, appeared to be in a very ambiguous situation, in which they were forced to defend their status as a children’s home as well as a specific form of family-based care. The SOS Village enjoys the support of the Children’s Ombudsman and its founder—the Russian Committee SOS Children’s Villages. These agents lobby for the interests of the Villages at the legislative level, and represent the Villages in different Committees and Ministries. The development of children’s villages as a specific and successful form of care for orphans was listed as a priority in the National Strategy:

Continuation of the reform of institutions for orphans and children without parental care, accomplished by downsizing, creating conditions close to the family, creating new modern children's homes in the form of a children's village in accordance with international standards and modern methods of development, education, rehabilitation of orphans and children without parental care...<sup>64</sup>.

According to an interview with the director of the SOS Village, recognition of this form of care for orphans at the level of the National Strategy was the result of the efforts of the Russian Committee SOS Children’s Villages.

---

<sup>63</sup> Mertha. 2009: 995-1012.

<sup>64</sup> No. 761 “On National Strategy of Action for Children 2012 – 2017,” 5:3  
<http://base.garant.ru/70183566/#friends#ixzz3oloLfpdg> (accessed on 8 August 2015).

At that time, the National Strategy clearly defined a general trend towards family-based care for orphans. Additionally, the “Dima Yakovlev Law” prioritized the adoption of orphans by Russian citizens. As a consequence, the SOS Villages received recommendations from above, simultaneously from the Ministry of Education and the Russian Committee SOS Children’s Villages, to formalize guardianship over their pupils. This meant that the Villages were forced to form foster families, and switch from an institutional to a family model of care. The transition to foster families had substantial consequences for the SOS Villages. From a legal viewpoint, the institutional children’s homes had to transform into a network of foster families. SOS mothers were compelled to head foster families, which required greater responsibility and legal obligation towards children as compared with the responsibilities of an employed caregiver. Currently, two forms of families are permitted in the Russian SOS Villages: the SOS-family, in which the director of the Village is the trustee of all children, and foster families, where the guardians of children are their foster parents.

The Ministry of Education and the head organisation of the SOS project in Russia both sent recommendations to the SOS Village. This fact indicates that the question on SOS villages was discussed at high levels of government. Some compromises were achieved and SOS villages continue their work in Russia. However, the status of the Villages was obviously manipulated for state interests. The administrative and reputational aspects of the existence of Villages in Russia became more complicated.

Ambiguity of status gives birth to involuntary duplication. Children’s homes and associations of foster families are legally distinct forms of organization. The Village is thus forced to have two “faces”: one for the Russian state, and one for the international founder. Legally this may entail for them the necessity of double accounting, and manipulating the statuses of orphans, who may be recognized as orphans, as pupils of a children’s home, or as children placed in foster families. The last status meets the requirements of official regulations much better than the first one.

In addition, the importance of the social programs promoted by the NGOs must be strongly argued to the state authorities and in making such arguments, the current discourse of the state’s social policy has to be taken into account. Protection of children is legitimated by the current political mood, but not every project for child protection can be promoted. To be successful, the project has to add to the public system of social services, while at the same time claiming to be independent of it.

As a result, being perceived to be in “opposition” to the authorities is counterproductive for NGOs. Examples show that projects or actions initiated by NGOs that violate the stable rules of state social care may lead to consequences which are undesirable both for the activists and for their clients—children.

During one of the visits [to an orphanage] I met a boy who had enlarged lymph nodes. I asked him, and he answered that he had been ill for three weeks, but nobody did anything. Then I took him in my own car to the hospital, where the doctor wrote a list of diagnoses and a list of necessary medications. When I brought him back with all his medications to the orphanage, the doctor at the orphanage got angry and told me that I shouldn’t have done that. After that, access to all the nearby orphanages was officially revoked for me and all other volunteers of our NGO (Samara’s *Domiki Detstva*).

Thus, a NGO’s successful operation essentially depends on its positioning. Loyalty and readiness to seek consensus are the basic aspects of an NGO’s position, which make productive collaboration between the NGOs and authorities possible. To work successfully, and in order simply to survive, NGOs are forced not only to provide their social services, but also to be visible and noticeable to the authorities.

In general, the NGOs providing child protection position themselves as two entities: as an executor and as an expert. An executor protects its function of implementing state social policy.

In positioning itself as an expert, an NGO is forced to demonstrate certain additional aspects in addition to loyalty and openness for compromise, such as deep knowledge or unique skills in a particular sphere and the ability to develop new social programs.

## **Conclusion**

The segment of civil society represented by NGOs protecting children in contemporary Russia is affected by socio-political, legal and even moral discourses. Moreover, the rules of the game which the state offers to NGOs, are transforming rapidly. Legal initiatives of the last few years contribute to a convergence between state and non-state actors, operating in the social sphere, which includes the field of child protection. In the conditions of a declining economy, the state regards NGOs mainly as assistants in the implementation of state social policy. Nevertheless, it would be wrong to assert that opportunities to influence policy are totally absent for non-state actors. The results of our research indicate that there are both opportunities and restrictions for NGOs where policy entrepreneurship is concerned, which also means that prospects for civil society development in Russia may be more hopeful than they sometimes appear.

The issue of firmer control by the state is challenging for NGOs who are willing to act as policy entrepreneurs. Socially oriented NGOs are almost entirely dependent on state subsidies. This means that an NGO's reputation acquires special significance. Professionalism and the willingness to work in a consensual manner are important components of the reputation: an NGO has to demonstrate regularly and publicly its efficiency and indispensability. At that very moment any NGO has to play by the rules established by the state. In such conditions policy networking serves a dual purpose. On one hand, collaboration with state actors gives the NGOs opportunities to improve certain policy options. On the other hand, cooperation with state officials may be a necessary condition for an NGO's survival and sustainability. Besides, construction of the "right" reputation takes a lot of additional efforts and resources from NGOs, and makes them totally transparent to the state.

Financial dependence on state grants makes socially oriented NGOs vulnerable, and independently authored projects initiated by NGOs suffer first and foremost. Developing such projects is a complicated process, which has a chance of succeeding only when it aligns with general trends in state social policy. The case of the relatively successful program Breathing Room shows that great efforts to promote a unique and extremely necessary social project may achieve an endorsement on the level of national standards of care for children, but still comes up against limits in attaining the level of a state-funded federal social program. The high degree of dependence on the state calls into question the possibility for NGOs to have independence and autonomy.

Nevertheless, socially oriented NGOs protecting children see in the process of "domestication" of the third sector new opportunities for solving problems and delivering policy suggestions. The main tool of policymaking here is contact with the authorities. Participation in official networks - such as meetings of regular working groups and councils, and membership in the Public Chamber - gives NGOs public visibility which helps to construct a proper reputation for the NGO and establishes their credibility as policy entrepreneurs. In some respects, the idea of real collaboration between state and non-state actors seems bogus, although inclusion into the formal networks allows building up new cross-sectoral contacts - this is how they get real support and opportunities for the development of policy options. Key contacts, which increase the efficiency of policy efforts, may issue not from official platforms, but from informal networks, long-term experience of working in the same field, prior experience of professional collaboration, or simply friendly relations between individual state and non-state actors.

In the sphere of defending children, representatives of NGOs have a number of opportunities to discuss problems in state policy towards vulnerable children. In particular, NGOs have good

opportunities to express their opinions to state providers of social policy. Officials at the executive level take part in the meetings of official cross-sectoral forums. At the lower level of executive power, the line between non-state actors and officials is rather porous. The main problem in developing a policy option is caused by the “vertical of power,” which remains very strong in Russia. The delivery of a policy solution to political decision-makers requires extensive efforts, and this is a common difficulty for NGOs and low-level officials. The best solution for this problem is NGOs operating at the federal level or Child Ombudsmen assisting NGOs in the improvement of policy options.