

# Environmental co-operation in Northern Europe: Assisting non-governmental sector in North West Russia – why and how?

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## Introduction

Sustainable development is one of the most important political principles in Northern Europe. Russia is the "critical point" for sustainable development in Northern Europe because of her vast environmental degradation, on the one hand, and for her ecological potentials, riches and natural resources, on the other. At the moment, political and societal situation in Russia is not very favourable for sustainable development. Environmental protection is not the political priority. While political elite of Russia concentrates on utilising natural resources, non-governmental organisations are the actors that try to raise the status of environmental problems and policies in contemporary Russia. They could, and to my mind should, also form the relevant and effective partner in environmental co-operation in Northern Europe.

As is commonly acknowledged, environmental movement played a remarkable role in the process that led to the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 (e.g. Jancar-Webster et al 1993). During the 1990s it has faded, even with massive financial support it has got from foreign governments and organisations. Still, the non-governmental sector in Russia has limited local resources, and no doubt needs assistance from abroad. An important question is, then, what kind of foreign assistance and co-operation would be most effective for the non-governmental sector in Russia. I have

recently studied this question in detail. In the study, which is part of my PhD research project, I analysed orientations and action spaces of NGOs of St. Petersburg. In the current paper, based on the study, I am particularly interested in *the role of foreign assistance* in the construction of action spaces<sup>1</sup> for the NGOs, and the question of how the non-governmental sector of North West Russia could best be integrated into environmental co-operation in Northern Europe. A more thoroughgoing report on the study is to be published later in another venue.

## Environmental movement in Russia

Oleg Yanitsky (2000) labels the years from 1987 to 1990 a period of 'informal green' politics, which marked the beginning of the overall green movement's politicisation in the Soviet Union. Mass campaigns, rallies, blockades and other forms of direct action were taken in order to place environmental issues on the political agenda. After the collapse of the Soviet Union the environmental movement in Russia split into politicians and non-politicians. The former went for politics concentrating on more general economical and political issues than environmental, while the latter remained without a unifying ideology or a shared programme (Yanitsky 2000: 45-46, see also Pickvance 1998). The promising phase of informal green politics came to its end. During the 1990s the environmental movement diversified, became bureaucratic,

professional and reformist in both ideology and tactics (Yanitsky 2000: 46). Moreover, Russian environmental non-governmental organisations reorientated from the self-production of resources to the search for western financial aid. Yanitsky (2000: 78) calls this shift “westernisation” of the environmental movement: the structure of the environmental movement changed, because financing priorities were determined by western experts and organisations.

A number of scholarly works devoted to the examination of the role of “western” assistance given to environmental and other non-governmental organisations in Russia in the 1990s are remarkably critical (e.g. Henderson 2002; Henry 2001; Mendelson 2001). The studies mention that western thinking often dominates the type, style and direction of international funding. Assistance has divided Russian non-governmental organisations into “haves” and “have nots”, and resulted in projects that reflect the agendas of foreign assistance programs rather than domestic needs. Moreover, the system in which donors administer limited funds through grant competitions has forced NGOs into a competitive relationship with each other and weakened the intergroup solidarity and co-operation. (Henry 2001; Henderson 2002: 143.) It has led to the conversion of the movement into numerous organisations locked into the implementation of received grants (Yanitsky 2000: 78).

Recent estimates put the total membership of environmental non-governmental organisations in Russia at between 25000 and 30000 (e.g. Yanitsky 2000: 1). Most organisations are, unlike before 1991, very small, consisting of less than 10 members. As Henry (2001: 10) notes, many nongovernmental organisations in Russia are really NGIs, “non-governmental individuals – organisations based on family networks or a charismatic leader”. Moreover, most environmental NGOs lack a strategy for expanding their membership (Evans 2002: 327), and are not even interested in broadening the base of their supporters.

## **Environmental NGOs in St. Petersburg**

### *NGOs and their basic orientations*

Cepilova (2002: 7) estimates that some 60 percent of the environmental organisations that were established in Leningrad in 1986-1987 ceased to exist already by 1989. As in Russia

in general, within a couple of years after the collapse of the Soviet system Leningradian environmental coalitions were replaced by many tiny groupings. In their inquiry concerning activities of environmental NGOs in St. Petersburg, conducted in 1998, Lahti and Kobec found out that there were about 160 active environmental NGOs in St. Petersburg<sup>2</sup>. Now, six years later, the number of really active environmental non-governmental organisations is much smaller, only some 20-40 depending on the method of assessment (Cepilova 2004; also my own observations). Bolotova et al (1998) note that the environmental movement in St. Petersburg is segmented and decentralised, and organisations are independent from national organisations. They classified environmental NGOs of St. Petersburg in 1998 according to their orientation into six groups: informational, educational, ecophilosophical, greens concentrated on nature conservation, ecological which try to influence decision-making, and groups for an alternative way of life. Later (2001) Bolotova classifies organisations to ecopoliticians, preservers and “publicists” and notes that there are far less organisations than there used to be earlier. The members of environmental organisations are often people with high education, mostly with degrees in natural science. For most NGO activists acting in an NGO is more than merely a hobby. For example, many scientists get much better paid by working for an NGO than for the Academy of Sciences (Ostergren & Jacques 2002).

In my study I aimed at reaching basically all really acting environmental NGOs in St. Petersburg. For this purpose I used a Directory of non-government environmental organisations of St. Petersburg (Lahti and Kobec 1998) as the starting point. I also visited a newly-opened centre for environmental information in St. Petersburg and its staff helped me to contact leaders of active NGOs. The result was meetings and interviews with 22 leaders. I excluded international organisations (WWF, Greenpeace and Bellona), because I wanted to study *Russian* NGOs.

As a result of the analysis<sup>3</sup> of the data I found out that environmental non-governmental organisations of St. Petersburg and the Leningrad region can roughly be divided into three groups according to their basic orientations. The first group consists of NGOs which work with the local and federal authorities, and have contacts abroad, too. Their main financial resource is foreign assistance, but they also gather finances by themselves. They are very

active and advocate public participation in decision-making. The second group contains organisations with ample relations abroad; they concentrate on applying funding from abroad. They do not collaborate with the authorities or try to encourage public participation. They get their funding solely from abroad. Organisations of the third group have relations to the authorities, but no contacts abroad. The source of funding is the authorities (indirectly, though).

A crucial point is that only the first group of NGOs – those who have ample relations both to the authorities and abroad – are societally and politically active. They focus on questions of public participation and environmental decision-making, while the second and the third group are politically inactive focusing on traditional nature conservation. Interviewees of third group NGOs said that they would like to obtain foreign contacts and funding, and be politically active. They told that once (in the late 1980s and early 1990s) they were active in all meanings of the word, but now they are not allowed to be. For example, one interviewee told me that his organisation was done away with possibilities to participate in environmental impact assessments anymore having not agreed with the authorities in some procedure. What is interesting, though, is that first group NGOs did not feel they have limitations of that kind.

#### *Action spaces of NGOs in St. Petersburg*

Accordingly, my analysis indicates that action spaces of organisations are not determined by their resource or contact network in general. Foreign assistance, for instance, does not necessarily determine what is on the agenda of assisted organisations. The first group NGOs get foreign funding while still acting relatively freely, whereas the second group NGOs follow donor's interests without any special interest in establishing contacts with the authorities or with other NGOs. To my mind, they are far removed from the idea of non-governmental organisations, and probably formed with the sole purpose of obtaining funding from abroad (cf. Henry 2001; Gray 1999).

The first thought is that the general political, economical and social conditions, not very favourable for non-governmental actors in Russia today, would constrain action spaces of NGOs the most. There are not too many institutionalised channels for NGO participation in decision-making in Russia where the oligarchy of the political and

financial elites holds the power to influence, and strengthening vertical power has further weakened the status of civic organisations (Tysiačnjuk & Karpov 1998; Alekseeva 2003: 125). Wernstedt (2002: 509) argues that most Russian NGOs have moved closer to the state in order to survive, and at the same time distanced themselves from civil society, become less concerned with opinions and participation of local citizens.

In the orientation profiles of St. Petersburg environmental NGOs, however, this seems to be a relative truth: the first group NGOs feel they can act relatively freely and lobby for public participation in decision-making. They are fulfilling the traditional role of non-governmental organisations when they act as a 'societal thermostat' and try to affect the way of development. The third group NGOs correspond more the impressions of Wernstedt (2002). They feel that the authorities force them to abstain from political and protest activities, and from foreign contacts, too. Actually, the most interesting question arising from the analysis is *why the action space of the first group NGOs is more extensive than that of the third group NGOs*.

Firstly, the third group NGOs are of older origin than the first group NGOs. Many of the third group NGOs used to exist already in the Soviet Union and at that time as a governmental organisation. After the collapse of the Soviet Union these organisations were closed down by the state but activists continued their work they considered important. My study demonstrates that the long history and tradition of organisations, let alone those who previously were governmental, seem to be a burden rather than an advantage. The authorities know activists for long, and expect them to behave in a certain way. In order to maintain their fame the third group NGO activists pursue moderate activities the authorities favour. It does not seem to help the situation that local officials personally know most of the third group activists – rather the other way around. Informal relations mainly limit the possibilities of non-governmental actors, because they disturb horizontal group formation. This is the danger in particular if the system of personalised relations is instrumental for survival and entails individual action instead of collective actions and trust (Alapuro 1996: 25-26).

Instead, the individual NGOs of the first group were founded in the conditions of the mid-1990s and do not have precursors in the

sense the third group NGOs have. This means the former have been able to establish relationships to the authorities with a clean slate, and even though they are critical and pursue also protest activities they have managed to build trustworthy relations to the authorities.

In other words, it seems that the third group NGOs are trapped in a vicious circle: they are afraid of acting more openly, because the authorities are their only support. They feel they cannot conduct against it, not establish connections abroad or inside the environmental movement for instance. Nevertheless, being without other support adds to their dependency on the authorities. This constrains their action space very radically. Instead, the organisations of the first category are not as dependent on the authorities, since they get support also from abroad and from other NGOs, too. They have a much wider backup network than the third group NGOs. Organisations within the second group, in turn, suffer from lack of interest: they are not interested in local level problems and are not familiar with political practices, because their activities reflect the agendas of foreign assistance programmes rather than domestic needs. That is why they are also ignored by the authorities.

## Conclusions

On the basis of my study conducted on environmental NGOs in St. Petersburg it seems that foreign assistance *per se* is neither of advantage nor of disadvantage for NGOs. There are other factors, explicated above, that contribute to the extent of the action space of an NGO.

To have a wide amplitude of possibilities to act an NGO needs knowledge and know-how, capabilities to appropriate institutional practices in order to be less suspicious and less dependent on the authorities. They need contacts inside and outside their country. I found out that they need human capital even more than financial capital, because only with the help of that can they become more independent and strive for a more reciprocal relation with the authorities. On the other hand, economic resources also help them to get out of the vicious circle. Nevertheless, donors should ascertain that NGOs they help have a contact surface in their society, too. As the case of the second group NGOs demonstrates, the money is wasted from the point of view of building civil society if NGOs have distanced

themselves from the rest of society and concentrate only on appealing donors.

How, then, do the results of my study relate to environmental co-operation or northern co-operation in general? As I noted in the introduction of this paper, environmental NGOs are probably the only substantive partners for environmental co-operation in contemporary Russia. In general, non-governmental organisations should be given a far more active role in Northern co-operation. In the Russian case experiences have not always been so good, and foreign co-operation partners have also been afraid that their help makes the authorities discriminative when it comes to NGOs. On the basis of the results of my study, however, it seems that this concern is not justified. Thus, I would suggest that in order to achieve better results in environmental co-operation in Northern Europe, focus should be laid on non-governmental actors; on their participation in diverse co-operation processes, and on their networking. Money is of second importance here.

## Endnotes

1 By the term 'action space' I refer to the dynamics of action: the opening of action spaces means the emergence of new possibilities to act.

2 Not all of them were 'environmental' in the sense the term is generally understood. The list included, for example, Experimental Fellowship of Authors of Songs and Society of Ingermanland Finns, which had had a project related to environmental protection.

3 In the analysis I applied narrative methods in general, and the actant model of A.J. Greimas in particular.

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