

***Promoting Democracy in Postcommunist Ukraine: The Contradictory Outcomes of US Aid to Women's NGOs.* By Kateryna Pishchikova. First Forum Press, a Division of Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2011. 237 pp. Appendix. Bibliography. Index.**

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Western aid to develop non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in postcommunist countries has sparked increasing interest among scholars. The collapse of communism coincided with a paradigm shift in international development work toward smaller-scale projects that enlisted NGOs as channels for delivering various types of aid and promised to raise new issues. Much attention has been devoted to assessing the often disappointing results of these projects. In this engaging and intelligent monograph, Kateryna Pishchikova contributes to this literature by examining the struggles of local women's NGOs in Ukraine.

The book opens by describing the puzzle that sparked Pishchikova's research. American democracy promotion programs make dramatic claims about civic empowerment (e.g., NGOs are the most effective vehicle for stimulating democracy) and have generally outspent other foreign donors. Yet, the reality she observed on the ground as a volunteer in, and occasional employee of, NGOs, is a field of "civic" organizations that serve as little more than personal sources of income for individuals that have learned to speak the language of civil society promotion that donors expect. Furthermore, a discourse on civic society has colonized Ukrainian political space that is unintelligible to local citizens. Tongue in cheek, Pishchikova asks: "Are the donors blind or do they just not care? Are the locals wicked or just plain stupid?" (p. 2)

To provide answers, the author builds on extensive interviews and observation conducted in Washington, D.C. and a variety of Ukrainian cities ranging from Kyiv, Lviv and Kharkiv to Chernivtsi, tracing the many layers of discursive justification involved in USAID's program to promote democracy. She starts her book by focusing on the competing understandings of civil society found in the communist era among East European writers and artists who retreated from officialdom into the "second society," and the "silent majority" of citizens who expressed private forms of resistance to officialdom through their personal commitments to advancing the welfare of their family and friends. Pishchikova next explores the mismatch between these two indigenous understandings of civil society and the entirely different discourses adopted by Western democracy promotion programs. She shows that foreign actors that implement Western projects are themselves outgrowths of the development industry, leading them to adopt technocratic (and imperialistic) assumptions. Rather than trying to nurture local understandings of democracy and civic participation, USAID's democracy building program reverts to disseminating American models of women's empowerment and self-help (e.g., building "self esteem" becomes the solution to sex trafficking).

What impact does this have on the Ukrainian women's movement? Pishchikova finds pragmatic acceptance and private manipulation, just as in the communist era. A

hierarchy has been created between a local elite of NGO-development-specialists who work for foreign agencies promoting their models of assistance (through endless “trainings” and “trainings of trainers”) and a local civil society of public organizations, many of which remain rooted in communist-era understandings of civil society and gender, but parrot the phrases donors expect in order to win grants (e.g., by positioning themselves as “NGOs” competing for “grants” to “empower women”). Local NGO professionals operate at cross-purposes to the stated mission of democracy promotion (e.g., winning foreign aid for themselves and their close friends), but are far removed from (even antagonistic towards) already existing women’s organizations let alone the broader citizenry that express different values than those expected by foreign agencies. The irony is that these existing organizations that Pishchikova considers more attuned to the local civic idioms spoken by Ukrainian citizens are thereby underfunded and further marginalized.

While some of this ground has been covered in previous studies, the author is a must read for NGO-ographers and more broadly, for scholars interested in gender and democratization. Her analysis of development discourse and its local readings offers a valuable of the incentives that promote a reproduction of Soviet styles of pragmatic acceptance among local NGOs of the new official categories through which intended beneficiaries of NGO grants must learn to understand politics and civic activism. Nonetheless, she leaves us with a sense that she may have provoked new questions that remain unanswered. Are the *real* villains of the story of Ukraine’s incomplete democratization the donors and their cynical local accomplices? What about the role of domestic political elites in undermining civic campaigns? Are there no real political successes of local NGO activism? While NGOs evidently do little to foster broader civic engagement and seem to engage mainly in unsustainable activities, more space could have been devoted to understanding when NGOs are able to achieve some form that is likely to take root in Ukraine. For instance, numerous universities and colleges now host gender studies centers and these appear to have a high degree of ongoing support among a small but growing community of scholars for gender studies. Similarly, in 2001 women’s and youth NGOs in Ukraine were able to forge a coalition to pass a law to prevent domestic violence, the first of its kind among postcommunist countries. This law, despite many problems with its implementation, appears likely to create an operational opening for future women’s rights activism.