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## THE PRICE OF PARTNERSHIP: THE NGO, THE STATE, THE FOUNDATION, AND ITS LOVERS IN POST-COMMUNIST RUSSIA

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Since the collapse of the Soviet state, there has been an explosion in informal organizing in Russia. Women are especially active in this sphere, setting up organizations to meet increasingly urgent social needs. In 1997, I conducted fieldwork in Russia amongst activists of provincial women's groups. My interest was in tracing the ways that organizational activity has been influenced by the arrival of foundations, which since the early 1990s have championed the work of informal, independent, or "non-governmental" organizations in Russia, as part of a broader commitment to civil society development and "democratization." In my research, I discovered that community groups and foundations had a shared concern, both advocating community initiatives without the state. Activists commonly spoke of having *given up on* the state. As one woman activist put it, "the state has abandoned us! We have no choice but to find our own solutions to our problems!" I found a similar-sounding rhetoric in the literature put out by foundations, which encourages non-state actors to find non-state solutions, or solutions outside the state.

In this paper, I shall demonstrate that despite this talk, both community groups and foundations are actually quite fixated on the state. At same time as they protest their determination to be independent, many activists do not believe that it is their role to replace the state as a provider of services, and look reproachfully toward the state for failing to meet its obligations. Foundations, meanwhile, acting as a kind of go-between, encourage organizations into a peculiar intimacy with the state, by advocating state/NGO partnerships. What does all this say about state-societal relations? What do "state" and "non-state" mean in post-socialist Russia anyway? And where do the foundations and its lovers come in?

When foundations (such as Eurasia, Ford, and the Open Society Institute) first arrived in Russia in the early '90s, they were met by a mass of independent societal groups, including women's organizations, ecological clubs, and political and professional associations. These were loose and fluid, and communication was poor between them. Foundations greeted such organizations and their representatives eagerly, and paid them a form of attention that has significantly changed the face of organizing in Russia. Through the provision of material and intellectual support (grants and training programs), they have encouraged them to develop their activities and to stand on their own feet. Groups have been encouraged to formalize, to register, to form links between each other, and to undertake certain types of activities, in the formation of a so-called "third sector."

The term *tretii sektor* (third sector) entered the Russian vocabulary with the arrival of western foundations and agencies and is used widely in the Russian-language promotional literature foundations to advertise their activity, and in the instructional materials they produce. Though incomprehensible to most people, it has become a crucial signifier for those involved in the community and social activism I explored in my research. Empirically, third sector refers to the space between state and society where informal, or non-governmental organizations are situated (the space that in liberal democratic contexts is commonly referred to as the public sphere). However, third sector also signifies a complex ideological project, a redrawing of state/societal relations along neo-liberal lines, where, ideally, civil society is strong and the state is "cut back" like an unruly perennial. However, despite this language, the state is actually very much present in the model of the third sector. According to the promotional literature disseminated by foundations, the "third sector" exists in the context of a triad, where the first is the state, the second is the private sector of business and enterprise, and the third is the realm of citizens' initiatives. As one American author put it, "the new metaphor is society as a three-legged stool - market sector, public sector and civil

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sector.” All three have to be in balance, and the third sector (or civil society) “should be an equal player with the market and government.”<sup>1</sup> *Partnership* between spheres, crucially, between NGOs and the state, is intrinsic to the logic of the third sector - and by 1997, it had become a common buzzword.

In December 1997, I attended a two-day seminar run by a provincial NGO support unit that was devoted to the theme of “partnership” - that is, how NGOs could most successfully enter into successful alliances with local authorities. Attended by about 10 representatives of small non-governmental groups, the seminar was run, or rather, *facilitated* by Vitaly from Vladimir, in a gentle, non-hierarchical manner designed to elicit our own experience and instill confidence. We worked in pairs, addressing questions such as - how to select a partner, what can they offer us? what can we offer them? - and then fed our ideas back to Vitaly, to be written up in marker pen on a flipchart. While participants had no difficulty in drawing up extensive wish lists, they were stumped when it came to the reciprocal relation. What on earth could *we* offer *them*, the power brokers? “They don’t need us,” my partner Vera muttered to me, snapping the lid back on her blue marker pen crossly. Vitaly shook his head gently at this negativity, and wrote up the word *imadzh* in red letters. “Politicians need to build an image for themselves, to look good in the eyes of the community. You can offer them the opportunity to provide you with support.” Vera didn’t fall for it.

So what was the appeal of this rhetoric? To what kind of people did it appeal? In order to investigate this further, it’s helpful to divide third sector actors into two groups – those, like Vitaly, who put out the message, and those like Vera who are on the consuming end. First, the consumers: I found that the message of the third sector is very appealing to the group most involved in societal organizations, the intelligentsia, and lower-level officials of the state bureaucracy, who have become morally and materially disenfranchised in the new democratic Russia. To them, the third sector appeared to represent a niche, a place in society where the worth of their endeavors and expertise would be recognized and called upon. Despite (or perhaps as a result of) widespread skepticism about politicians and politics in Russia, which is regarded as an intrinsically dirty game, activists such as these found the rational, scientific literature of the third sector very compelling. “Third sector” provides a very dignifying formulation for its participants; according to the model, the three sectors exist in a kind of harmony. The third sector, the space of citizens’ initiatives, is able to count on support, and on *recognition* from the other two (government and business). The partnership in question is one of equals. According to this logic, the third sector is a repository of human resources, a rich mine of skills, expertise and energy, thus it is within the state’s interests to call on it. The stance of an actor of the third sector is no longer that of a supplicant, accepting benefits from a paternal socialist state, but of a professional, negotiating for a contract on equal terms. Indeed, third sector actors regard themselves as something of a vanguard, educators of backward looking bureaucrats and officials. One friend, an unemployed professor who was an eager fan of third sector seminars, returned from a public meeting with the regional governor appalled, but self-righteous - “Can you imagine, Julie,” she said to me, “he didn’t even know what the third sector was!”

Another appealing dimension of the term is that it signifies a new, uncorrupted space, free of any compromising Soviet association. This makes it particularly attractive to the radical intelligentsia, those to whom an expression of opposition to the state is a crucial part of their identity. Foundations appeared to be natural interlocutors for activists of organizations that had a very critical relationship to the state, such as the Independent Women’s Movement, for example. Many of these activists met third sector discourses and technologies with great enthusiasm; some of them have been able to use them to enter into close relationships with foundations.

In my research, I picked up numerous narratives about the third sector’s power to bring out the best in people, or to bring out the best people, in the interests of all society. However, participation in this sphere remains beyond the reach of most people. Foundations, through the ideology of the third sector, talk Russian people into an idealized fantasy relationship with the state,

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one that, however attractive, is out of step with most people's reality. Activists, particularly in the provinces, frequently complain that rather than greeting them with an eager and business-like handshake, the state is reluctant to support or even acknowledge their work. When scarce city funds are occasionally awarded to non-governmental organizations, they tend to be channeled towards those whose claim to this status is rather dubious.

If these are the uncertain consumers, who are those I am calling the persuaders, those who take on the task of talking people into the third sector? Let's return to Vitaly and his seminar. It is often the case that those who most comfortably use the language of the third sector and contemplate these partnerships are those who have their arses firmly wedged on the three-legged stool, those who are invested in all three sectors. In the provinces, the third sector is often the property of local elites, who were able to make a neat sidestep from state or party structures to colonize "non-governmental" space. Vitaly's seminar was organized by the "Humanitarian Institute," a provincial third sector support unit that has been the recipient of several large foundation grants. It is registered as a societal (*obschestvennyi*) organization, but has received support from the city administration, and is situated in spacious, well-located offices in the center of town. It is strikingly well equipped for its provincial circumstances, and has several computers, printers, a xerox machine (all of which are conspicuously lacking in the offices of the local newspaper, situated one floor up). Contra the association of third sector with uncontaminated space, the institute is perceived not to be neutral, but to exist squarely in elite hands. The directors of the Institute are a husband and wife team, Lydia and Pavel Kharkov, who command significant clout locally. Lydia was an active *komsomolka*,<sup>2</sup> Pavel was the director of the Marxist-Leninist Institute, the municipal ideological center of the Communist Party, which was responsible for the dissemination of party propaganda and the preparation of party cadres. In 1992, what was once "Marxist-Leninist" became "Humanitarian," and the institute was swiftly privatized to undertake a variety of new civil-society friendly projects, including the dissemination of third sector ideology.

In sum, third sector professionals make up a small and elite in-crowd, which comprises both old elites and members of the Soviet era radical intelligentsia. Those who put out the literature, control the technology and "live on grants" are increasingly distant from the societal organizations in whose name they speak. This causes a good deal of disquiet amongst some of the more democratically-minded oppositionists, including many of the women's activists I spoke to. Meanwhile, the main consumers of the third sector message (the groups that set up with more concrete local objectives) find themselves in a less satisfying position. Firstly, the relationships with the state that these groups have been enticed into are experienced less as partnerships, than a new and uncomfortable form of dependency. Secondly, *partnership* posits a clear division of labor, whereby the third sector has a strong *service* component. Societal organizations, such as local women's groups and charitable and philanthropic associations, thus end up fulfilling some of the socialist state's former functions, providing social services that the crumbling state sector is no longer able to provide, and stopping up the gaps of the radical free market. While prepared to fill in for the state on a temporary basis, activists are far from convinced that this division of labor is appropriate. One woman pointed out the contradiction, that it is primarily state employees engaged in this voluntary work - unpaid in their official work, they conduct additional unpaid work in their spare time. As she put it, "What I find most objectionable about this, is the exploitation of our goodwill."

Vehement talk about the lack of the state in Russia serves to conceal its continued, but transforming presence. Beneath the ostensible diminishing of the state and effervescence of civil society, there is a blurring of both categories, which signals a reorganization of hierarchies and a reconfiguration of state/societal relations. Characters such as Vitaly, Vera, Pavel and Lydia collide in their attempts to make sense of the third sector, as they struggle to find a foothold for themselves in the shifting post-socialist terrain. While activists of local community groups struggle for their own

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survival, third sector professionals have their own anxieties. Protected from the state by snug proximity to foundations, they are all too aware of a third sector secret - that the foundation functions as a kind of invisible and precarious fourth leg, propping up the third sector model but writing out its own existence.

### **Notes**

<sup>1</sup> Rifkin, Jeremy. 1997. "The Information Age and Civil Society." In *Surviving Together*, Summer 1997.

<sup>2</sup> Member of the Young Communist League.

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