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# ‘The Foreign Within’: State–Civil Society Relations in Russia

KIRSTI STUVØY

## *Abstract*

The development of Russian civil society is linked to authoritarian government, fear of ‘colour revolutions’ and the ‘sovereign democracy’ that legitimises state control of civil society. This article acknowledges the narrowing room for manoeuvre of contemporary Russian civil society and discusses NGOs’ practices in the context of government pressures, the politicisation of transnational connections and the increasing geopolitical tension surrounding Russia. It describes the localisation and depoliticisation of Russian NGOs as well as their disruptive practices, and explains how narrowing civil society identities inform the self-governing of NGOs. Finally, it argues that seeing Russian civil society in simple dichotomies further narrows these identities.

THE POLITICAL LANDSCAPE EMERGING FROM RUSSIA’S POST-SOVIET experience continues to be dominated by the state. An important part of this new landscape is nonetheless a renewed organisational and civic life. Since the early 1990s, many of the newly formed post-Soviet civil society organisations in Russia were invigorated by transnational connections through which they received new ideas and financing, as well as prescriptions about what projects and thus what kind of NGO work was valuable (Henderson 2002; Hemment 2004; Sundstrom 2005). As is now widely known, such connections have become in the last decade the target of the Russian government. With the introduction of the ‘foreign agent’ legislation in 2012, stipulating that NGOs that receive funding from abroad and that are politically active in Russian politics must enlist as ‘foreign agents’, a boundary between ‘legitimate’ and ‘illegitimate’ civil society was enforced in Russia.<sup>1</sup> In the literature, this governing of Russian civil society is connected to the authoritarian tendencies of the Russian state (Gel’man & Ryzhenkov 2011, p. 450), the elite’s fear of the contagion of ‘colour revolutions’ and the Russian state-building concept of ‘sovereign

<sup>1</sup>Law on Foreign Agents ‘Federal’nyi zakon Rossiiskoi Federatsii ot 20 iyulya 2012 g. no 121–FZ (O vnesenii izmenenii v otdel’nye zakonotatel’nye akty RF v chasti regulirovaniya deyatelnosti NKO)’, adopted 20 July 2012, available at: <http://www.rg.ru/2012/07/23/nko-dok.html>, accessed 26 March 2020.

democracy' (Evans 2008; Richter 2009a; Richter & Ghodsee 2009). The contemporary situation for Russian civil society can therefore be explained as a result of both the domestic and international struggles in which the Russian state finds itself.

Importantly, the state encourages those elements of civil society that it considers helpful to its mission of establishing a civil society that collaborates, and is in this sense, beholden to the state. The state is not setting out to crush civil society; its treatment of civil society reveals 'the hybridity of the regime' (Bogdanova *et al.* 2018, p. 504). Since the mid-2000s, a variety of legislative and institutional measures have been established to shape a civil society that fits in with the state's definition of democracy, including the introduction of public chambers, the expansion of state funding mechanisms for civil society, and the prioritisation of socially oriented civil society organisations that provide welfare services alongside public providers (Evans 2008; Richter 2009a; Stewart & Dollbaum 2017; Tarasenko 2018, p. 516). The Russian regime distinguishes its own form of democracy—so-called 'sovereign democracy', known as 'authoritarian democracy' to Western scholars—from other democracies. One aspect of this is the state's control over civil society, essentially, supporting 'harmless' or pro-government civil society organisations while suppressing or obstructing others through a variety of means, including the deployment of the 'foreign agents' law. In line with this approach, the state has successively taken measures to govern foreign links to Russian civil society and underscored that such connections delegitimise civil society. By making transnational ties a liability, the governing of state–civil society relations in Russia has taken on an elevated geopolitical dimension.

The heightened geopolitical tension in the relationship between Russia and the West since 2014 forms the background condition against which I approach Russian state–civil society relations in this article. Drawing on feminist epistemologies, I am concerned with the experiences and perspectives of individual Russian NGO activists on the social relations that shape their perceptions of how civil society is developing and the practices they adopt in response to their (geo)political context (Enloe 1989; Sylvester 1994; Tickner 1997). In the context of pressures arising from the Russian government's project of 'sovereign democracy', the politicisation of transnational connections and the increasing geopolitical tensions surrounding Russia, I ask, how do particular NGO activists reflect on their role in the evolution of transnational collaboration and the activities they are involved in, and how do they assess their ability to manoeuvre within the sphere of Russian civil society? The article aims to identify core struggles shaping Russian state–civil society relations without reducing them to simple dichotomies (Hemment 2012). Recent research has provided rich empirical analysis of the domestic constraints on Russian civil society and contributed to a nuanced understanding of both constraints and opportunities for NGOs in Russia (Moser & Skripchenko 2018; Skokova *et al.* 2018; Tarasenko 2018). Although this article applies a similar approach to the on-the-ground experiences and practices of civil society, it supplements it with an analytical interest in the combination of external and internal factors in Russia's contemporary social and political development. Such a perspective has been applied in studies of Russian elites and high politics (Clunan 2009; Snetkov 2012) but is missing with regard to state–civil society relations. This is the gap that this article attempts to fill.

The analysis contributes with qualitative data on the EU–Russia Civil Society Forum, a network of NGOs from across the European Union and Russia established in 2011. The

Forum represents a space of transnational civil society activity and an evolving and dynamic space of cross-border civil society action. The article draws on activists' reflections on the Forum's establishment, consolidation and organisational development during which common and diverging ideas about the Forum, and particularly its role *vis-à-vis* Russian civil society development, have been discussed (see the Appendix). The development of the Forum has coincided with increasing attention and funding from the European Union, which emerged in parallel with the growing tensions in EU–Russia relations after the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014. Interviews were conducted with professionals engaging with the Forum to explore multiple perspectives on the relations shaping the Forum's development, both from the EU and the Russian side, namely, representatives of the EU's External Action Service (EEAS), the EU Delegation in Moscow, the European Social and Economic Council and the federal-level Russian Public Chamber in Moscow. For this article, interviewees have been anonymised and, when quoted, given pseudonyms and introduced in terms of key characteristics of their NGO-work or profession.<sup>2</sup>

To provide the necessary historical context for the discussion of the foreign or transnational links in Russia's contemporary state–civil society relations, this article begins with a review of the post-Soviet transition context of state–civil society relations in Russia. Particular attention is directed to the presence and effects of transnational interconnections, the flow of ideas and money that supported the emergence of civil society in post-Soviet Russia, and how this shaped particular NGO identities and agencies in the local context. In the second step, I address how NGO agencies have adapted to the formal and informal constraints that have emerged in the domestic political context over the last decade. Next, I address the Forum as a case study that demonstrates how Russian NGOs understand their involvement in such a transnational context to inform their position and identity in the domestic political landscape, and how they calibrate this involvement accordingly. The Forum has emerged as a vibrant and attractive platform and meeting place for Russian civil society outside Russia, and appears as a space for the 'exploration' of one's identity, exchange of views, and reflection on choice of tactics and strategies. A pervasive self-discipline in anticipation of the unexpected is evident in how NGOs engage with the Forum. The preferences of civil society actors in the Russian domestic context reflect the variety of tasks that they complete and on which they base their self-representation and legitimacy.

However, as the European Union has strengthened its support to civil society in Russia, and channelled it through the Forum, Russian NGOs' room for manoeuvre has been affected by an increasing geopolitical zeal on the part of the European Union. This scenario has added—perhaps unintentionally—to the difficulties the Russian NGOs face in their conduct. In a fourth step I therefore attend particularly to the EU and its discursive representation of Russian civil society. I argue that the EU's increasing support of the Forum has nurtured distinctive NGO identities, reflecting the EU's dichotomous understanding of Russian civil society as divided between those organisations embraced

<sup>2</sup>Interviews were conducted in 2015 and 2016 and a list of interviews is provided in the Appendix. Relevant to this article is also the author's participation in two of the Forum's general assemblies, namely those held in Budapest on 7–9 December 2015 and in Helsinki on 1–3 February 2016. Since then, the Forum has held assemblies in Sofia (2018) and Bratislava (2019).

by the state—the so-called government organised NGOs (or ‘GONGOs’)—and the ‘vulnerable rest’. This reinforces a dichotomous perception of state–civil society relations in Russia that overlooks experiences on the ground and the struggles within which the everyday practices and agency of Russian NGOs are situated.

*Localised and (de-)politicised: Russian civil society and the post-Soviet transition*

Civil society in Russia has been widely assessed as weak throughout the post-communist period (Bindman 2015, p. 343). Yet, in the same period, civil society has undergone important changes, including the development of agency amidst the constraints imposed on them by the state. With the liberalisation of civic life in the late 1980s, the groundwork was laid for the emergence and expansion of many new civil society organisations throughout the 1990s. The initial period of liberalisation was followed by a phase of professionalisation and regionalisation of the Russian NGO community, supported by the influx of foreign funders and concomitant advisers (Henderson 2002; Hemment 2004; Sundstrom 2005). Overall, a liberal political atmosphere characterised this phase, during which a broad variety of local initiatives and informal groups emerged amid what has been described as President Yel'tsin's ‘benign neglect of civil society’ (Henry & Sundstrom 2006, p. 3). Essentially, the state was not particularly interested in controlling the emerging civil society. Today, the situation is different. Political developments in Russia are increasingly dominated by anti-liberal and repressive legislation on NGOs; the legitimacy of the current presidency rests, among other things, on the distancing of the current regime from the 1990s liberal era.

This development has its roots in the political changes that took place in the mid-2000s. Since then, state–civil society relations have been defined within the nationalist-oriented ideology of ‘sovereign democracy’. When President Vladimir Putin's first deputy chief of staff, Vladislav Surkov, presented this idea of the ‘sovereign democracy’ in 2006–2007, he argued that ‘democratic ideals should be adapted to the unique attributes of Russia's history and culture’ (Richter 2009a, p. 10). Within this nationalist framework, an explicit rationale emerged as a basis on which to challenge the ‘foreign’ elements of domestic civil society and to limit in particular its ‘liberal agency’. Despite this emphasis on the past and domestic uniqueness, Morozov (2008) identified the concept of ‘sovereign democracy’ as a logic that connects domestic politics to Russian identity politics in a global context. The term ‘sovereign democracy’ implies a Russian identity that aims to disrupt the Western hegemonic idea of democracy, which is a prime focus of the Putin presidency; however, Russia has thereby also retained democracy as the dominant norm. Concomitantly, for Morozov, Russia has emerged as a ‘subaltern empire’ in the sense that it does not mobilise its own moral authority but practises a ‘vulgarizing imitation of the universal democratic norm’, hence mimicking ‘the discourse of the colonizer’ (Morozov 2013, p.18). Russia's foreign policy identity is thereby approached here as hybrid and co-constituted in relations with its significant other, the West. This hybridity is relevant to foreign policy and relates to ‘outside others’ and also, I argue, to state–civil society relations in Russia. When civil society appears as an ‘outsider’ and is governed as a ‘foreign within’, the state governance of civil society is not reducible to the objectives of domestic political order and stability;

rather, relations between state and civil society are entangled in Russia's international relations, in particular, its struggle for status and global power.

Certainly, foreign links, funders and international collaboration all played an important role in reviving civil society activism in the post-Soviet context, as documented by various ethnographic studies and political analyses. In the early 1990s, independent women's groups, environmental and human rights organisations were among those receiving the most attention from international donors (Henderson 2002; Evans 2006; Bindman 2015, p. 343). Today, human rights and environmental NGOs are among the organisations most often listed on the 'foreign agent' register and thus experience disruptions and the restructuring of their transnational interconnections (Tysiachniouk *et al.* 2018). The 2012 'foreign agent' legislation requires NGOs involved in political activities and receiving funding from a foreign source to register as a 'foreign agent'—a term that is interpreted as both sinister and threatening (Flikke 2016). A second legislative initiative, the 2015 law on 'undesirable organisations', led to a blacklisting of four foreign funders.<sup>3</sup> These laws imply that certain civil society organisations are not to be trusted because they may be pursuing 'foreign' interests and, together with the concept of a 'sovereign democracy', have made civil society into a geopolitical battleground. The state aims to control the kinds of civil society that can operate within its boundaries by reinforcing sovereignty as integral to the operation of democracy and civil society activity.

This logic has developed insidiously. It is visible in the transitioning of many Russian women's groups from non-state to state actors. During the 1990s, the high number of women involved in NGOs contributed to the impression of a feminisation of Russian civil society (Salmenniemi 2005). The Soviet tradition of women's councils was part of the reason why many women organised to contribute to tackling societal challenges such as unemployment, the training of journalists, police officers and lawyers, and domestic violence as the Soviet Union unravelled (Sperling 1999). Women's groups were thus dealing with everyday challenges in the new Russian state while also maintaining dialogue with international donors and advocacy networks. During the 1990s, such domestic initiatives were crucial, and interaction with foreign funders, who provided specific ideas on how to 'build' civil society organisations in addition to material resources, was vital for the emergence of post-communist civil society in Russia (Henderson 2002; Sundstrom 2005; Hemment 2007). Importantly, the example of women's groups demonstrates how NGOs were both locally active and globally connected at the same time.

Throughout the 2000s, women's groups were also subjected to state control and many transformed into so-called socially oriented organisations or they were taken over by the state and became state-owned crisis centres for women (Johnson 2009). These changes in how women's groups operated illustrate the typical results of government initiatives that aimed to build a state-backed and increasingly state-controlled civil society: a specific local space was crafted for civil society organisations in post-communist Russia as

<sup>3</sup>The list of 'undesirable' organisations published in December 2015 included The Open Society Foundation, the Open Society Institute Assistance Foundation, the National Endowment for Democracy and US Russia Foundation for Economic Advancement and the Rule of Law. The list has since been extended to 20 organisations. The Russian Ministry of Justice publishes the list, available at: <https://minjust.ru/ru/activity/nko/unwanted>, accessed 26 March 2020.

anti-NGO legislation emerged and the state nurtured a collaborative civil society. The ‘foreign agent legislation’ and the politicisation of international donors aimed to localise NGOs. The restriction on political activity when receiving foreign funding is the most evident effect on civil society organisations and their agency. For Russian NGO representatives, it became imperative to distance their work from political activity, to appear ‘non-political’, or to be prepared to face the consequences, including fines, lawsuits, a change in status and other unpredictable outcomes.

The practices whereby NGOs strive to be non-political can be illustrated through a statement from Sonya, an experienced Russian human rights advocate working in this field of civil society activism for more than a decade. Speaking in English, she explained the struggle of keeping within the boundary of ‘non-political’ as an NGO activist:

My position is that we have to divide two things. One [dimension] is political-political when we are talking about being in power, and ... another [dimension] is the influence on the policy. So, what we are doing is we want to be [an] equal partner, and we have expertise and we know what should be done in order to make policy more effective and this is the influence [that we can bring to bear] on the policy. ... From my point of view, it’s not political activity in this period, it’s policy expert activity.<sup>4</sup>

In the contemporary political context, Sonya aimed for the role of ‘policy expert’, which she identified as non-political. Emphasising her position as a ‘policy expert’, Sonya actively depoliticised her human rights work while building on the expert narrative of efficiency, neutrality (not striving for power) and partnership with the state. This is produced as distinct from being ‘political-political’, which is associated with the struggle for power that comes with being embedded in politics and ‘being in power’. Providing advice on how to make appropriate political choices was construed as more problematic in this position. As an NGO-representative, Sonya actively sought a position removed from power and excluded from politics, and thereby (unintentionally perhaps) depoliticised her NGO as an ‘expert provider’ and adviser for policy that had no bearing on the government’s exercise of power or prerogatives. However, human rights advocates such as Sonya find themselves in a narrow space within which to legitimise their position. The flexibility of the space civil society activists carve out for themselves hinges on the dynamic interpretation by the authorities of what is acceptable and at the same time not (too) ‘foreign’.<sup>5</sup>

As an experienced NGO representative, Sonya recognised that when an NGO’s objective is to improve the human rights situation, the NGO must ultimately work to achieve change that is systemic and thus political. For that purpose, policy-recommendations are developed and communicated to political authorities, and if the national context does not offer space for

<sup>4</sup>Interview with Sonya, NGO representative Russia and member EU–Russia Civil Society Forum, Budapest, 8 December 2015. All names are pseudonyms.

<sup>5</sup>This example illustrates that the process of drawing a boundary is problematic. Take the example of an NGO providing services to disabled youth: how could such an organisation advocate the reorganisation of state support structures to improve the lives of this particularly vulnerable group? What are the consequences if the NGO’s advocacy draws on international, normative documents on disability such as the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities? In conclusion, boundaries are unclear and uncertainty dominates.

dialogue and negotiation on the suggested policies, human rights activists have turned to international colleagues to convey the message to the central government (Keck & Sikkink 1998). Perhaps the belief in dialogue and exchange contributed to the initially reserved response by many NGO representatives to the ‘foreign agent legislation’ when it was first introduced in 2012. Many did not bother to self-register but, since 2013, the authorities started to visit NGOs to investigate their finances, and court cases were filed against several organisations that had not registered (Lyons & Rice-Oxley 2015). In 2014, state authorities started to register NGOs on the ‘foreign agent’ list to address the lack of self-registration, and in court hearings, evidence is scrutinised regarding the ‘political character’ of the NGO’s activity.<sup>6</sup> Golos, an election-monitoring NGO, was amongst the first to be registered by the authorities on this list in 2012, as a response to an award that Golos was awarded from the Norwegian Helsinki Committee, the Sakharov Freedom Award, which included US\$10,000 in prize money. In 2014, after an appeal by Golos, the Moscow City Court ruled that the organisation had never received the prize money and Golos should not have been on the foreign agent list.<sup>7</sup> This example demonstrated that an NGO could win such a court battle albeit to no effect as Golos remained on the list and was later dissolved.

Another instructive example is the case of the Nizhni Novgorod-based Committee Against Torture, which was placed on the ‘foreign agent’ list by the Ministry of Justice in 2015. To deal with the concerns of foreign funding and political activities, the Committee reformed under a slightly different name, Committee to Prevent Torture, stopped foreign funding and became an umbrella organisation for various sub-organisations (Zimmermann 2014, p. 322) In sum, the ‘foreign agent’-label created precarious conditions for NGOs as it ‘shaped a stigmatizing public debate on civil society, based on intimidating and incriminating control and monitoring mechanisms’ (Flikke 2016, p. 124).

In addition to the ‘foreign agent’ list, there is also a list of ‘socially oriented organisations’. Together, these lists require NGOs to self-identify according to the distinction between human rights organisations and socially oriented organisations. These categories are firm, narrow and not reflective of the heterogeneous practices of post-Soviet civil society organisations or how they self-identify. The state’s desire to control and dominate civil society is evident in the narrowly defined categories and identities provided on these lists, into which NGOs are required to fit themselves. By creating categories such as unwanted organisation, foreign agents and socially oriented organisations, the state is debunking the more hybrid identities of the NGOs, which combine cultural and social activities with policy development. These lists are thus to be seen as a repressive measure, inasmuch as they narrow the identities and space for action for Russian NGOs. The next section focuses on how NGOs have, amid the abundance of formal and informal constraints that

<sup>6</sup>In 2015, a procedure for how to request removal from the Foreign Agent Registry was introduced (Skibo 2017).

<sup>7</sup>The Norwegian Helsinki Committee reported this on their website ‘Moscow City Court Rules Golos is not a Foreign Agent’, 10 September 2014, available at: <https://www.nhc.no/moscow-city-court-golos-is-not-a-foreign-agent/>, accessed 26 March 2020. See also ‘Russia’s Golos has “Foreign Agent” Status Removed’, Radio Free Europe, 8 September 2014, available at: <https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-electoral-rights-golos-foreign-agent/26573204.html>, accessed 26 March 2020.

have emerged through the state approach to civil society in Russia, managed to preserve their agency.

*Russian NGOs: contained, self-managed and disruptive*

The governing of Russian civil society has, through financial and institutional constraints, led to a ‘crowding out’ of civil society. In effect, civil society organisations that are critical of authorities are supplanted by the regime’s local or neutral groups and, while critical NGOs continue to exist, they face a ‘dramatically uneven playing field in the civic sphere’ (Gilbert 2016, p. 1555). This unevenness can be traced back to the early 2000s when foreign funding to Russian NGOs began to drop. At the time, international donors started to experience increasing government pressure, which was linked to a heightened wariness about ‘colour revolutions’: the period 2003–2004 has been described as a ‘watershed for democracy assistance programmes in Russia’ (Beznosova & Sundstrom 2009, p. 25). In parallel, the Russian government emphasised the role of civil society in the modernisation of Russia and, in 2010, introduced presidential grants and other funding opportunities for civil society (Skokova *et al.* 2018, p. 543). This state concern with civil society development also led to the initiation of consultative bodies, among them the so-called ‘public chambers’ comprising civil society representatives whose role is to provide a public point of view in the policy process.<sup>8</sup> There is a federal-level public chamber in Moscow, and public chambers on the regional level as well as a variety of consultative bodies that consult government authorities on specific issues—health, education, prison-systems—that aim to ensure civil society is heard. The consultative practice that has emerged constitutes an agenda for shaping a state-sponsored civil society and is seen by certain scholars as part of ‘large-scale recentralization of governance and the rise of authoritarian tendencies’ (Gel’man & Ryzhenkov 2011, p. 450). Public chambers and consultative bodies are thus an expression of a particular state approach to civil society as ‘a coherent, ordered space where individuals assist the state in the interest of the whole’ (Richter 2009a, p. 8).

The move towards ‘managing society’ (Richter 2009b, p. 61) has been criticised for creating a ‘dummy of civil society’ with a merely decorative function (Evans 2008; Richter 2009a, p. 8; Javeline & Lindemann-Komrova 2010). However, it is important to study the agency of civil society within this state-dominance, including how NGOs adapt, frame their involvement in consultative organs and assess their room for manoeuvre (Stuvøy 2014). Russian NGOs do not necessarily reject the concept of civil society as being helpful to the state and as agents in problem-solving. This kind of civil society is co-dependent on the state and working for incremental change through established state institutions (Bindman 2015). In these circumstances, civil society has agency, and in the everyday practices of engaging civil society in consultation, there emerge crises, conflicts and disruptions. Thus, the Russian state nurtures a specific form of institutionalised civil society, and in this context, struggles and disruptions are part of everyday interaction,

<sup>8</sup>Representatives of public chambers are selected in a three-tiered process of appointment. For example, in regional chambers, one tier is appointed by NGOs registered in the region, one tier by representative elective bodies and one tier by the governor, the top echelon of power (Stuvøy 2014).

while NGOs are controlled through legislation and the informal pressures of the political climate.

The consequences of state co-optation of civil society materialise in how NGOs self-govern to remain within the boundaries of what is considered legitimate. NGOs have found inventive ways to overcome the formal restrictions, including escaping the ‘foreign agent’ label by re-registering as a business, as was the case for the LGBT organisation ‘Coming Out’ and the environmental NGO ‘Bellona’ in St Petersburg, or by continuing activities under another umbrella organisation. Regarding the more informal effects of self-management, many NGOs feel themselves to be compelled towards a practice of hyper-compliance as they strive to keep within the boundaries of what is considered acceptable, even though these boundaries are not clear. The risks are thus many and unpredictable, and as NGO-activist Nadezhda explained in an interview in 2015,<sup>9</sup> it makes strategising comparable to driving a car on low beam in the dark—instant responsiveness and a short-term focus are a must. When also reflecting on the formal and informal constraints and the unpredictability of the situation, the human rights advocate Sonya explained that a primary objective is survival:

It is difficult to predict even for one year, but the only thing I can say is that it’s about the trends in Russia, what we already observed and what could happen in the coming months. I think that the pressure campaign [by the government] will be intensified and it’s already had a lot of impact on civil society.<sup>10</sup>

For NGOs, everyday operations are defined by a great deal of insecurity. The NGO representatives interviewed while researching this article have explained that they dealt with the lack of predictability by focusing on how they regulated and disciplined themselves with a view to be able to continue their work, while constantly looking for innovative ways to conduct their activities. A survival discourse is prominent in recent studies of Russian NGOs.<sup>11</sup>

When Russian NGOs opt to self-discipline in order to survive, this suggests an element of choice, although the extent to which civil society organisations actually have a choice is debatable. In the literature, the governing of Russian civil society is assessed as having a ‘homogenising effect’ because of the way it structures civil society by empowering groups controlled and funded by the state (Crotty *et al.* 2014; Gilbert 2016, p. 1572). However, the rise in protest activity over the last few years demonstrates civil society agency and choice. Examples of such protests include demonstrations against the construction of a highway in the Khimki Forest outside Moscow (Evans 2012; Tamkin 2017), against the failure of the authorities to deal with wild fires in southern Russia, and in the expansion of urban protest activity across cities in Russia, for example with regard to housing issues (Semenov 2017; Fröhlich 2020). Reflecting on urban protest activity in the context of the narrowing space for NGOs through the state regulation of this space, Jacobsson and

<sup>9</sup>Interview with Nadezhda, NGO representative Russia and Forum member, St Petersburg, 15 June 2015.

<sup>10</sup>Interview with Sonya, NGO representative Russia and member EU–Russia Civil Society Forum, Budapest, 8 December 2015.

<sup>11</sup>See, for example, Moser and Skripchenko (2018).

Korolczuk observe that ‘urbanites have developed creative and subversive ways of performing resistance that balance on the borders between overt and covert forms of resistance, defiance, and protest—and thus operate under the authorities’ legal radar’ (Jacobsson & Korolczuk 2019).

Resistance is also evident in the use of art to convey critical and political points of view, both towards the dominance of the state and the perceived apathy of people. Most prominently, the punk-feminist rock group Pussy Riot has challenged the federal government; other performance artists, including Petr Pavlensky, have also engaged with state power and contemporary societal and political developments in Russia. The environmental NGO Greenpeace was involved in disruptive activities in 2012 and 2013 when activists attempted to board a floating oil platform to demonstrate against oil and gas exploration in the Russian Arctic. In 2013, this turned into an international news event as Russia launched a militarised campaign against the 30 international activists on board the Greenpeace ship and imprisoned them (Gerhardt *et al.* 2019). Such disruptions are still part of the repertoire of Russian NGOs, albeit as exceptional rather than regular practice. Such disruptive action is in contrast to the localisation that has resulted from the politicisation of NGOs, as exemplified above by the women’s groups.

We can therefore conclude that NGO agencies encompass depoliticisation and disruption, but also that there are various options for NGO agencies within the state push towards localisation. Against this background, it can be reiterated that the dominant assessment of Russia’s civil society as being divided into two opposite camps—*nashi* (‘ours’), who are co-opted by the state, and *chuzhi* (‘others’), who are relegated by external, critical bodies (Gilbert 2016, p. 1572)—appears too rigid. Such a dichotomous approach lacks nuance because it obscures the everyday practices of resistance amidst state dominance, and is too limited when considering how, in practice, NGOs interact with and approach the state. Such interactions include acceptance of and loyalty to the dominant state. As we shall see, contention around acceptable and legitimate positions for civil society activity amid state constraints have also been part of the struggle in the EU–Russia Civil Society Forum, and it is in this case study that we can identify more clearly the geopolitical dimensions that shape state–civil society relations in Russia.

#### *The EU–Russia Civil Society Forum: transnational ties and local politics*

The EU–Russia Civil Society Forum was initiated in 2011. In contrast to the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum, which was created in 2009 by the European Union to facilitate civil society involvement in the European Neighbourhood Program (ENP), the Forum was a grassroots initiative.<sup>12</sup> The Forum became connected to the ENP as it

<sup>12</sup>The ENP emerged in 2003–2004 as the EU’s concerted effort to engage with its neighbouring countries with the main emphasis on Eastern Europe. A key priority of the ENP is to strengthen civil society across borders in the EU neighbourhood.

received a majority of its funding through the European Neighbourhood Program Instrument (ENPI).<sup>13</sup> The Forum brings together Russian and EU-based NGOs, and in the context of the shrinking domestic space for Russian NGOs, it has emerged as a platform for interaction not only between NGOs from Russia and the EU-countries, but between NGOs from across Russia. Within the first five years of its existence, the Forum almost tripled its membership. In 2017, the Forum reported in its Annual Assembly that it had 150 members, two-thirds (83) of which were Russian NGOs. In 2020, the total number of members is stable, and now the number of Russian organisations (73) is almost half of the total number, with 83 members from EU countries.<sup>14</sup>

The Forum, and its annual general assemblies in particular, provides a common space to interact, socialise and discuss possible common projects, strategies and tactics on how to develop civil society. The Forum's primary aims include furthering collaboration and strengthening the integration between NGOs in Russia and the European Union. Judging by its significant increase in membership within a short period of time, the Forum is a success. The rapid expansion of members led initially to organisational difficulties, which is rather unsurprising, considering the agenda of building a new, cross-country platform for civil society organisations. The Forum has responded to its own success through an equally rapid professionalisation. It has established a secretariat, currently located in Berlin, to deal with day-to-day management and the preparation and planning of general assemblies. At the general assembly in 2017, the Forum consolidated its organisational status and went from being a network to being registered as a legal entity, which was launched in spring 2018.

During the initial years of its existence, the Forum dealt with challenging questions pertaining to strategic developments. Developments in Russia fed into this process of organisational consolidation and development. In response to the increasing state pressure on Russian NGOs, the Forum has issued statements on behalf of the member organisations, for example, in connection with the first general assembly in Prague in 2011. However, it soon became difficult to achieve consensus over these statements and to speak with one voice. After the Russian adoption of the 'foreign agent legislation' in 2012, the Forum's statement criticising the Russian government and demanding the law's abolition prompted a fierce debate. One of the founding members of the Forum, here named Sasha, an EU-based NGO representative, recalled how the tension within the Forum increased during the general assembly, which was held in The Hague in 2013 just after the law on 'foreign agents' was passed in Russia. Sasha, a Brussels-based human rights activist active in the Forum, explains that the statement revealed a division between civil society organisations in the Forum about how to deal with politically contentious developments:

<sup>13</sup>Interview with John, European External Action Services representative, Brussels, 27 April 2016. In addition, public documentation of Forum's funding, distributed on the General Assembly of the Forum in Helsinki, 1–3 February 2017, in author's possession.

<sup>14</sup>The membership list is on the website of the Forum, available at: [www.eu-russia-csf.org](http://www.eu-russia-csf.org), accessed 27 March 2020.

We have different points of views where some people feel strongly about being more critical and more vocal, and others say that this is not very constructive, and it might damage their future. Then the conflict arises.<sup>15</sup>

The conflict is the division among the NGOs themselves, between what Holden (2016) labels ‘principled *versus* pragmatist’ NGOs. ‘Principled NGOs’, mostly NGOs working on issues related to international law and human rights, based both in the EU and Russia, argued that the Forum should condemn Russia’s policies and advocated that the EU put pressure on Russia. ‘Pragmatist NGOs’, typically Russian NGOs working on social issues, often with an everyday working relationship with local authorities, were concerned with what they considered harsh wording against Russian authorities in the Forum’s statement. The ‘principled NGOs’ were pursuing the expected or traditional route of a transnational advocacy network, as described by Keck and Sikkink (1998), asking states or international organisations to boomerang their message back into the domestic political context, in which they aimed to achieve change. The ‘pragmatists’ cautioned against such measures and emphasised that these measures could influence local power relations and have a disruptive, even damaging effect on the NGOs’ local position and, ultimately, their agency. Despite these divergences, a common viewpoint among the pragmatist and principled NGOs was that the EU needed to listen to and learn from the myriad experiences of local NGOs. Such engagement has enabled the EU to understand how local NGOs interpret and understand, for example, proposed changes in Russian legislation pertaining to their work.<sup>16</sup> What the ‘pragmatists’ feared, however, were the effects of a critical EU voice on state–civil society relations in Russia because this voice risked aggravating their precariousness as they navigated between their membership in the EU–Russia Civil Society Forum and the power relations that defined the shrinking domestic space of Russian NGOs.

Masha, an experienced Russian NGO representative based away from the centres of St Petersburg and Moscow, made the case for a pragmatic position:

I have been criticised from both sides. On one side, the Office of the Public Prosecutor [in Russia] claims that we are the ‘fifth column’ of the government. On the other side, public organisations ask: ‘How can you work with such a regime?’ And this is a problem, because there are some processes that have to be maintained, because government authorities are instruments, which I am using to realise public interests. I want to maximise an opportunity to create great partners instead of enemies.<sup>17</sup>

Masha explained how she tried to find room to manoeuvre amid the power struggles, both within the EU–Russia Civil Society Forum and the domestic space wherein she was active. Her aim was to ensure the continued implementation of substantial projects in the public interest on the local level in Russia. Masha expressed her fear that if the Forum

<sup>15</sup>Interview with Sasha, NGO representative, human rights activist and member EU–Russia Civil Society Forum, Budapest, 7 December 2015.

<sup>16</sup>Interview with Mons, European Economic and Social Committee representative, Brussels, 3 March 2016.

<sup>17</sup>Interview with Masha, NGO representative Russia and member EU–Russia Civil Society Forum, Budapest, 8 December 2015.

continued to issue statements critical of Russian politics, this would aggravate the domestic power relations with which civil society activists had to contend.

One outcome of the struggle between pragmatist and principled points of view in the Forum was that the practice of common statements was paused in 2013. However, the domestic constraints on Russian civil society continued to be an important topic in discussions at the Forum in the period of study. Sasha, an active, ‘principled’ NGO representative in the Forum, explained that, in his view, innovation inside Russia is required:

I believe that things can only change from within the country and not from the outside in the given context. The problem is that there is very little room for activists, for civil society, for political activists to do anything inside the country, but that’s the time when they have to be creative... [to] challenge government propaganda.<sup>18</sup>

Sasha identified transnational advocacy as a source of support for domestic activists. The Forum is one possibility for such support and Sasha explained that the Forum ought to be vocal in its presentation of alternative viewpoints challenging the Russian government’s approach to civil society. What was needed, according to Sasha, was to mobilise people with stories that appeal to their imagination about a different future and to involve them in the struggle for the realisation of this future. Such action reflects the democratic values at the heart of the Forum, and Sasha’s linking of the Forum’s efforts to the Russian context exposes the belief in transnational links as an important identity attribute.

Sonya, the human rights advocate mentioned previously, pointed out that the Forum has an instrumental dimension because it aims to give voice to Russian NGOs in the international arena, and to use this to put pressure on Russia to follow its obligations in terms of international standards. She also identified the transnational civil society interaction facilitated through the Forum as important amidst the increasingly tense relations between Russia and Europe: ‘on official level, [the] relationship is getting more and more difficult. It is much more crucial to create more and more relationships on the people-to-people level’.<sup>19</sup> Therefore, according to Sonya, the purpose of the Forum was to make NGO representatives more active, to reach out and find different approaches, and to elaborate new programmes to develop contact and relations between people. Such practices, she explained, made the Forum a ‘horizontal grassroots platform’ for civil society across the EU–Russia border. Yet, because of the diversity of Russian NGOs in the Forum, there is no common, coherent position among them with regard to transnational links. In particular, according to Sonya, ‘social NGOs’ stood out with their focus on ‘practical aspects’, and their prioritisation of ‘good relations with the local authorities’.<sup>20</sup> Their activities were concentrated on seeking ways to collaborate and find practical solutions.

<sup>18</sup>Interview with Sasha, NGO representative, human rights activist and member EU–Russia Civil Society Forum, Budapest, 7 December 2015.

<sup>19</sup>Interview with Sonya, NGO representative Russia and member EU–Russia Civil Society Forum, Budapest, 8 December 2015.

<sup>20</sup>Interview with Sonya, NGO representative Russia and member EU–Russia Civil Society Forum, Budapest, 8 December 2015.

Amidst these constraints, membership in the Forum was attractive because NGO representatives felt connected and wanted to be linked across the Russia–EU boundary. The involvement was an identity marker for Russian NGOs, explained Masha:

For some this [the Forum] is a way of identification in Russia, in [the] public sphere you declare: Yes, I do not receive foreign money, but I am a participant in an active process of interaction with Europe. This is a part of the identity. And it allows . . . . It performs a very important function in this sense, acquired in addition to what the Forum originally wanted to do. It just happened.<sup>21</sup>

At the same time, Masha added, ‘all Russian organisations, which are clearly claiming that they are members of the Forum, are increasing their risk’.<sup>22</sup> Thus, fear and uncertainty were omnipresent, and as members of the Forum, if the Forum were to be declared as an undesirable organisation by the Russian authorities, the Russian member organisations would be confronted with the challenge of how to respond.

Based on the experiences and reflections of the NGO representatives interviewed, the transnational activism that the EU–Russia Civil Society Forum offers them is that it provides a form of identification for Russian NGOs. This common identity is a support mechanism as they deal with the risk and uncertainty in the domestic context. The Forum is also a space for Russian NGOs to help make sense of their domestic role through interaction with the others, both other NGOs inside Russia and EU-based ‘others’. However, the domestic political situation has produced uncertainty, which has been aggravated by the crisis in EU–Russia relations after the 2014 Russian annexation of Crimea. In the next section, attention is therefore directed at EU activities pertaining to Russian civil society development and how this foregrounds the transnational dimensions of Russian civil society development.

#### *The discursive production of Russian civil society by the European Union*

The EU targets the civil society of other countries as part of its foreign and development policy. Ostensibly, this policy aims to create a civil society aligned with EU interests and values of security, democracy and human rights. The ENP is one example of such a policy. To instigate positive change in the neighbourhood, the EU builds relations with civil society, promoting certain NGOs as particularly important to the key processes—including democratisation and marketisation—in neighbouring countries. However, the EU’s support of the expansion of civil society networks and the transmission of ideas makes civil society an agent in a geopolitical ordering of state–civil society relations (Boedeltje & van Houtum 2011; O’Dowd & Dimitrova 2011; Scott 2011). The European Union is thus a geopolitical subject that invites states to become EU members; at the same time, however, the EU demands a restructuring of state–civil society relations

<sup>21</sup>Interview with Masha, NGO representative Russia and member EU–Russia Civil Society Forum, Budapest, 8 December 2015.

<sup>22</sup>Interview with Masha, NGO representative Russia and member EU–Russia Civil Society Forum, Budapest, 8 December 2015.

as part of the membership process (Aalto 2002; Bialasiewicz *et al.* 2009; Boedeltje & van Houtum 2011, p. 141; Scott 2011).

The power dimensions of the EU approach to civil society emerge from the dual objectives of the ENP. Firstly, these ideals encompass an ideational aspect that is enmeshed in ‘superior European values’ into which the EU’s neighbours will be socialised; secondly, the conditionality approach demands certain institutional changes by neighbours pertaining to these ‘superior’ values (O’Dowd & Dimitrovova 2011, p. 178; Scott 2011). The EU thereby aims to ‘contribute to politico-economic stability’ in its neighbourhood (Boedeltje & van Houtum 2011, p. 122). This framework construes the neighbour as in need of change while emphasising the voluntary base of the cooperation and the shared interest in prosperity, security and stability. Through the ENP, the European Union also demands adaptation to EU values and procedures: although the European Union offers a privileged partnership, it thus simultaneously elevates the superiority of the EU and embeds its offer of partnership in asymmetric power relations (Scott 2011). A challenge for the European Union is recognised in the overlapping authorities, diverse institutional arrangements and the various identities that create a fuzzy basis for inclusion and exclusion. This defines the European Union as a geopolitical subject as acting in ‘a continuous pragmatic process of ordering its geopolitical space through defining itself, defining its neighbours, defining its complex multilateral and bilateral relations and defining its changes through enlargement and relations with its neighbours’ (Boedeltje & van Houtum 2011, p. 141).

With similar aims to those outlined in the ENP pertaining to engagement with civil society, the EU–Russia Civil Society Forum has, since its establishment in 2011, become a node in the EU’s network of consultation with civil society organisations and a key provider of knowledge on Russian civil society development to the EU.<sup>23</sup> The Forum’s Secretariat acts as the point of contact for the EU’s External Action Service’s Russia and Human Rights division. Both the magnitude of EU financial support to the Forum and the extent of collaboration with the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC, the members of which are representatives of civil society in EU member states)<sup>24</sup> have expanded since the Russian annexation of Crimea.<sup>25</sup> The expansion of EU support to the Forum can also be an expression of how the European Union has elevated the role of civil society in its approach to Russia.

<sup>23</sup>Interview with John, EEAS representative, Brussels, 27 April 2016; interview with Mons, European Economic and Social Committee representative, Brussels, 3 March 2016; interview with Peter, representative of the EU Delegation to Russia, Moscow, 27 September 2016.

<sup>24</sup>The EESC, established in 1958, is a consultative body within the EU, representing members from three tiers of interest groups: employers, workers and so-called ‘diverse interest’ of representatives from civil society. The EESC is a non-political EU body that gives representatives of Europe’s socio-occupational interest groups a formal platform on which to express their views on EU legislative proposals that are of direct importance to them. It has a role in the Union’s decision-making process: its opinions are forwarded to the Council, the European Commission and the European Parliament. The 350 members in the plenary join six sections, one of which is the Section for External Relations (REX). Within REX there is a Russia division, which sees the Russian federal-level Civic Chamber in Moscow as its counterpart.

<sup>25</sup>Interview with Peter, representative of the EU Delegation to Russia, Moscow, 27 September 2016; interview with Mons, European Economic and Social Committee representative, Brussels, 3 March 2016.

The change in the EU's approach to Russian civil society after the Russian annexation of Crimea is also reflected in the shifting nature of the relationship. In an interview with John, an adviser at the European External Action Services, he reflected on the effect of the crisis:

To tell you the truth, the fact that we have a big crisis with Russia is making it easier for us to do things on human rights. Precisely because we have a crisis, we are freer in a way. If we didn't have a crisis, or before 2014, we had to be more careful. [Then] there was a façade of good relations, a lot of interaction, trade, and things like that. If we were too critical, they [the Russian government] could counter-attack. In the past we would have been careful not to hurt the Russian government's sensibilities in our work on civil society and human rights. Now we don't care about harming their sensibilities. When I say we don't care, I am exaggerating a bit, but we are not as careful as we were before.<sup>26</sup>

This quote underscores the uncertainty and unpredictability that characterises post-2014 relations, but also expresses that the open struggle that now unfolds has some benefits as it allows for more outspokenness and less concern with sensibilities. This is weighed against potential harm done to the EU interests, yet, as the EU–Russia relationship has worsened, these interests are thought to be less exposed to damage from possible 'blame-and-shame' politics from Russia.

The interdependence of the EU and Russia is important for Russian NGO activism. A key point of discussion within the Forum concerns how and by what means the EU can best support civil society development. One Forum member, human rights activist Sasha, explained that EU sanctions on trade with Russia had been suggested in 2013, but was rejected, and after the Crimea annexation, when the EU was finally motivated to impose sanctions, the effect of the sanctions is questionable as the state-governed space for Russian civil society is narrowed further. For the EU, regular dialogue with activists through the Forum about the pressures they were experiencing became an alternative way of supporting civil society in Russia. Through this regular dialogue, the concerns of the activists can inform assessments and decisions on whether and if so, how, the European Union can help.<sup>27</sup>

The European Union has identified the Forum as key in its support to the element of Russian civil society that is threatened in the Russian domestic context. This element is referred to as 'non-systemic' or 'non-pro-regime' civil society. As John explained, the demarcation of these 'non-systemic' organisations from other NGOs in Russia is challenging:

Russian civil society can be everything. But we are thinking of the civil society that is threatened. Although everyone is becoming threatened now more and more, even the socially oriented and environmental NGOs, so it does not mean we are only supporting Memorial [that is, human rights].<sup>28</sup>

Thus, the European Union conducts its own delineation of civil society in Russia by focusing on 'non-pro-regime' NGOs. EU assessments of the current political context in

<sup>26</sup>Interview with John, European External Action Services representative, Brussels, 27 April 2016.

<sup>27</sup>Interview with John, European External Action Services representative, Brussels, 27 April 2016.

<sup>28</sup>Interview with John, European External Action Services representative, Brussels, 27 April 2016.

Russia—and more in particular those related to how repressive laws increased the pressure on Russian NGOs—motivate the EU to identify non-systemic NGOs as its core partners. For the European Union, these organisations are distinguishable from GONGOs, which are seen as puppets of the Russian government and characterised by a lack of independent thinking.<sup>29</sup>

However, this statement exposes a dichotomous view wherein Russian civil society is seen as threatened, leaving little or no space to acknowledge any of the autonomy that Russian civil society may have *vis-à-vis* the Russian state. With this approach, the EU therefore conveys the understanding that authoritarian institutions control Russian civil society development, hence producing an unambiguous interpretation of developments in contemporary Russian civil society. Within the Forum, however, similar EU understandings are contested by Russian NGOs themselves. Explaining their room for manoeuvre in the domestic context, and how they benefit from their foreign relations while carefully managing them, activists presented everyday civil society practices in Russia with greater nuance than in the EU image of Russian civil society. The categorisation of NGOs as either ‘regime-friendly’ GONGOs or ‘vulnerable NGOs’ furthermore delegitimises the ‘pragmatist’ point of view expressed above. In the pragmatic positions, the NGO agency in Russia encompasses the possibility of criticising the government, yet the focus of their work is to establish workable relations to people in power at the local level, in the cities or villages in which they aim to achieve real effects of their NGO activity.

The specific EU approach has thus produced an understanding of Russian civil society as dichotomous, ignoring nevertheless how some Russian civil society organisations manoeuvre and define their activities in a context of state dominance. The dichotomy that emerges is too simplistic, inasmuch as it presents the European Union with a suitable way to describe Russian civil society as an entity in need of change. The binary logic imposed on Russian civil society through this approach excludes struggles and everyday contestations within civil society. This approach has furthermore reinstalled an asymmetric power relationship that favours a principled approach based on human rights. This complicates the assessment of everyday pragmatic reasoning that characterises civil society activity more broadly in contemporary Russia.

Finally, this approach reflects an EU-based geopolitical ordering of the world. While this approach does not ignore Russian NGO experiences, it reinstates a hierarchy of NGO experiences wherein the principled, human rights-dominated NGO agenda is identified and prioritised. The ‘other’ civil society is seen as ‘vulnerable’ because it is controlled, which also means that it is dependent and not autonomous. The ability to uphold such a representation of Russian civil society requires a discursive power; however, this power is contested by the agency of Russian NGOs themselves.

### *Conclusion*

The ambition of this article was to provide a nuanced empirical analysis of developments in Russian civil society and to contribute to the discussion of how internal and external factors combine in shaping state–civil society relations in Russia. The article began with a review of

<sup>29</sup>Interview with Peter, representative of the EU Delegation to Russia, Moscow, 27 September 2016.

the evolution of post-Soviet state–civil society relations in Russia and emphasised in particular how NGO representatives have, since the mid-2000s, adapted and changed how they conduct their activities in response to the gradual strengthening of the top-down, state governing of civil society. The localisation of NGO practices was explained as an outcome of this way of governing, and pragmatic as well as disruptive agencies were identified as part of the NGO repertoire of action in response to localisation. A common response, it was argued, is for NGOs to self-manage and to handle both formal and more subtle, informal pressures in the Russian political context.

From the starting point of engaging with multiple agencies in Russian civil society, it was emphasised that the state dominance of state–civil society dynamics in Russia informs how NGOs identify distinct positions from which to manoeuvre and define their agency and practices. Overall, civil society identities are narrowed through legislation, rigid NGO categories and diminished funding possibilities. The self-governing of NGOs is therefore guided towards remaining within what are believed to be legitimate boundaries of ‘sovereign democracy’. Yet these boundaries are unclear, implying that the space for NGO practices in Russia is not fixed. NGOs have different experiences of how to challenge and evade the discursive power of the state. As noted above, some NGOs depoliticise their activities, while others challenge the state through disruptive NGO practices.<sup>30</sup> Nonetheless, a lack of predictability and an ever-present insecurity feature prominently in the concerns of Russian NGOs. Consequently, NGOs tend to act reactively and with a short-term or tactical focus. When long-term, strategic civil society activity is difficult to realise, NGOs run a risk of undermining their own position. This in turn becomes an unintended accelerator of civil society decline in Russia.

Against this background, the EU–Russia Civil Society Forum has emerged as a space outside Russia in which Russian civil society actors can explore identities and forms of positioning and achieve input, through support and dialogue on this platform for international exchange amongst civil society actors from across Russia and Europe. The case study of the Forum brought novel empirical data into a discussion about Russian civil society development. The Forum provides material and ideational resources, including networks and ideas, and represents a space for the discussion of organisational matters, substantial issues, value choices, and strategic and tactical choices pertaining to the development of the Forum as well as how Russian NGOs engage domestically. The case study of the Forum amplified how domestic struggles inform relations between Russian NGOs within this transnational space: Russian NGOs have disparate views with regard to their preferred strategies and tactics and disagreements pertain to conflicting NGO identities. On the one hand, there is a ‘principled identity’, characterised by NGOs rejecting collaboration with the Russian state; on the other, a ‘pragmatist identity’, characterised by an openness to collaboration with the authorities while not necessarily embracing the Putin regime. Within the Forum, the domestic politicisation of Russian civil society shapes relations between the NGOs and (re-)produces the dichotomy of principled

<sup>30</sup>These positions are likely intertwined with the struggle of traditional-conservative and liberal positions identified by Chebankova (2015). This point, however, has not been explored in the research showcased in this article.

and pragmatic points of view. The discursive representation of Russian civil society by the EU, as a dominant supporter of the Forum, further reinstates such binary logic. It was described how the EU nurtures a particular kind of civil society that reflects the European Union's 'principled' position of favouring NGOs that have an antagonistic rather than pragmatically cooperative relationship with the Russian state, namely, NGOs focused on politically contentious issues rather than on social. Albeit unintentionally, this image produces a large part of Russian civil society dominantly as 'vulnerable', a reductionist view that fails to identify agency amid vulnerability and state dominance. This discursive production of Russian civil society narrows the space for ambiguity and flexibility in how Russian state–civil society relations are understood, with consequences for how donors define their forms of interaction with Russian NGOs.

Finally, the analysis has focused on the understanding of Russian state–civil society development as seen from the point of view of Russian NGOs and their external partners, in this case, the EU–Russia Civil Society Forum and the EU. The state has become a background variable. This analytical move underscored that Russian civil society is not merely shaped by the command-and-control approach of the Russian state, but that transnational connections also shape the (diverse) self-understandings of Russian NGOs. Furthermore, this analytical move also exposed the discursive power of representation, and how the operation of such power implies that the transnational space constrains NGO agencies in ways not too dissimilar from the domestic, state-dominated space. In this way, global power relations become part of the context in which NGOs assess their repertoire of action, not exclusively in relation to the state but within a context of interconnected transnational and local power relations. This article aimed to empirically ground the understanding of geopolitics in state–civil society relations and has thereby identified a need to conceptually further re-think the role of global power relations as manifest in local NGO agencies.

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*Appendix. List of interviews*

Interviewee	Date	Organisation	Location
Nadezhda	10 June 2015	NGO representative Russia, Forum member	St Petersburg
Sasha	7 December 2015	NGO representative, human rights activist; member EU–Russia Civil Society Forum	Budapest
Sonya	8 December 2015	NGO representative Russia; member EU– Russia Civil Society Forum	Budapest
Masha	8 December 2015	NGO representative Russia; member EU– Russia Civil Society Forum	Budapest
Mons	3 March 2016	European Economic and Social Committee	Brussels
John	27 April 2016	European External Action Services representative	Brussels
Peter	27 September 2016	EU Delegation to Moscow representative	Moscow
Anonymous 1	6 December 2015	NGO representative, EU–Russia Civil Society Forum	Budapest
Anonymous 2	2 June 2015	NGO representative Russia, member of Forum	St Petersburg
Anonymous 3	3 June 2015	NGO representative Russia, women’s organisation	St Petersburg
Anonymous 4	3 June 2015	NGO representative Russia, Forum member	St Petersburg
Anonymous 5	10 June 2015	NGO representative Russia, human rights	St Petersburg
Anonymous 6	20 January 2016	Norwegian Helsinki Committee	Oslo
Anonymous 7	22 September 2016	Civic Chamber of the Russian Federation	Moscow
Anonymous 8	26 September 2016	Civic Chamber Russian Federation	Moscow
Anonymous 9	26 September 2016	NGO representative, Greenpeace	Moscow

*Note:* All names listed are pseudonyms.