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The Impact of Nonstate Actors on Social Service Reform in Russia and Belarus

Eleanor Bindman and Tatsiana Chulitskaya

Since the collapse of the USSR in 1991, post-Soviet countries have been following different paths of development. While some conducted radical political and economic reforms, others made only partial changes to their political and economic structures. Despite these differences, there were significant changes in national welfare systems in all cases. Since 2000, the Russian welfare system has moved from the Soviet model of heavy subsidies and broad state social provision to a more mixed model based on means-testing, privatization, and the increasing involvement of nonstate actors such as NGOs and commercial enterprises in the provision of social services to vulnerable populations such as children, the elderly, the disabled, and families living on low incomes. In Belarus, the state has remained largely responsible for the delivery of social services as it was during the Soviet period, but quality is often poor, eligibility has been tightened since 2007, and recently there have been nascent attempts to involve NGOs in the delivery of social services. At the same time, social policy and the provision of public welfare continue to be of vital importance in maintaining the legitimacy of the electoral authoritarian regimes that dominate both countries, and nonstate actors working in this area may have some influence on social policy or its development.

The chapter begins with a brief discussion of the Multiple Streams Framework (MSF) and how its concept of “policy entrepreneurs” is applied in the context of the nondemocratic regimes in Russia and Belarus. Next we explain the recent context of welfare reform in both countries and explore how and why processes of “outsourcing” social services to NGOs

and other providers became a viable option. We rely in our discussion on data gathered from interviews with NGOs in both countries between 2015 and 2018 and ask whether NGOs have the ability to act as policy entrepreneurs in framing social policy problems and presenting solutions in a way that has influenced national and local priorities in this area. We argue that despite the significant constraints NGOs face when trying to operate in the social policy sphere in Russia and Belarus, there are nevertheless some opportunities for them to influence the development and implementation of policies in this area and that they are capable of using their knowledge, expertise, and contacts to do so. Our findings mirror others in this section in that advocacy groups do achieve concrete policy outcomes and that it is made possible by the regimes' need for information and expertise that advocacy groups are able to provide. Regime-legitimation claims based on social welfare create opportunities for advocacy groups in both countries to provide "expert" information, as the study on Zimbabwe (chapter 11) and the large-N analysis in chapter 12 confirm. Furthermore, our findings have implications for both the study of how civil society operates in post-Soviet authoritarian regimes and our understanding of the policy-making process in these contexts.

NGOs as "Policy Entrepreneurs" in an Authoritarian Regime

NGOs and other nonstate actors such as think tanks or interest group lobbies have long acted as "partners" to the state in democracies and have had input into the process of designing government policy, particularly where social policy is concerned (Bode and Brandsen 2014; Rhodes 1996). This has led to the development of so-called "network" governance, in which the traditional boundaries between the public, private, and voluntary sectors become blurred and policy networks involving formal and informal relationships and direct and indirect contacts between state and nonstate actors develop around shared areas of interest in policy making (Rhodes 2007; Mintrom and Vergari 1998). Kingdon (2014) argues that the process of setting the agenda for action in a particular policy area follows a "garbage can" model with three components: problems, policies, and politics. Within the "problem" stream of this model various problems capture the attention of policy makers and other key figures at a particular point in time. This could be the result of systematic indicators gathered by governmental or nongovernmental sources, or it could be prompted by a sudden "focusing event" such as a crisis or disaster (Kingdon 2014, 90, 94). In the

“policy” stream, specialists, bureaucrats, and interest group representatives generate and discuss proposals within a “policy primeval soup,” with some of these proposals being taken up and others simply discarded (Kingdon 2014, 116). The “politics” stream consists of various events, both predictable and unpredictable, such as changes in national mood and public opinion, election results, and changes of administration. These streams generally function independently, and policy issues will only get on the agenda when they are “coupled” and “a problem is recognized, a solution is developed and available in the policy community, a political change makes it the right time for policy change, and potential constraints are not severe” (Kingdon 2014, 165).

At this point “policy entrepreneurs” emerge from the policy stream to take advantage of this “window of opportunity.” These are persistent, well-connected members of a particular policy community—operating inside or outside governmental structures—who have expertise relevant to that policy area (Kingdon 2014; Mucciaroni 1992). In order to ensure that their particular policy proposal rises to the top of the agenda, they often spend years “softening up” other members of their policy community and the general public (Kingdon 2014, 143). According to Cairney (2018, 200), effective policy entrepreneurs combine three key strategies in order to be successful in what is a highly complex and unpredictable policy-making environment: “telling a good story to grab the audience’s interest; producing feasible solutions in anticipation of attention to problems; [and] adapting their strategy to the specific nature of each ‘window.’” Furthermore, they are skilled when it comes to strategic thinking, team- and coalition-building, collecting evidence, and negotiating and networking (Mintrom 2019).

While Kingdon’s work focused on the specific and highly fragmented context of policy making within the United States, the multiple-streams framework (MSF) has since been applied to a number of different political systems and units of analysis, with varying degrees of success (Herweg, Huß, and Zohlnhöfer 2015). What most of these studies have in common, however, is a focus on applying the MSF in the context of high-income countries and in democratic regimes, with some notable exceptions (cf. Ridde 2009). What is less clear is whether there are opportunities for potential policy entrepreneurs to have input in the policy-making process in electoral/competitive authoritarian regimes such as Russia and Belarus (Hale 2010; Levitsky and Way 2010; Bedford 2017). This type of regime is characterized by “electoral manipulation, unfair media access, abuse of state resources, and varying degrees of harassment and violence [that] skewed the playing field in favor of incumbents” (Levitsky and Way 2010).

To analyze the policy-making process in nondemocratic regimes, some scholars have explored the role of NGOs as policy entrepreneurs in China's authoritarian political system. Mertha (2009, 996) argues that those who were previously excluded from the policy-making process in China, such as NGOs, activists, and journalists, now play an active role in this process and its outcomes as they have learned to abide by the "rules of the game" and to operate within a system of "fragmented authoritarianism." Within such a system, policy change tends to take place incrementally and through bureaucratic bargaining. He and Thogerson (2010, 675) argue that the Chinese government has been willing to open up some consultative space for NGOs and other civic groups in order to bolster the legitimacy of the state without jeopardizing the Chinese Communist Party's monopoly on political decision making (see Li, chapter 7 this volume). Teets (2018) argues that policy networks constructed by NGOs in China in fact operate in a manner comparable to those in democracies, despite the more constrained conditions in which they must operate and in the absence of major changes in the political power structure. While the Chinese political system remains more overtly authoritarian than the Russian and Belarusian systems, the three cases nevertheless have some parallels. Under the centralized, semiauthoritarian system that has developed during President Putin's tenure since 2000, the state operates largely autonomously from society at large, and elites are insulated from the public (Greene 2014). In Belarus, Bedford (2017) argues that the regime makes use of a "menu of manipulation" involving selective repression, controlled openness, and the targeting of electoral rules, actors, and issues in order to eliminate alternatives to the political status quo. At first glance, Russia and Belarus may thus, like China, seem to be unlikely settings for NGOs to have much input into policy design or implementation at either the national or local level. Yet, as Duckett and Wang (2017, 94) point out, policy making in any authoritarian state involves other actors aside from the top leaders and their supporting elite: "policy actors in authoritarian regimes are potentially just as susceptible as their counterparts in democracies to the influence of contingent external shocks and to the complex mix and flow of ideas around them."

Studies of policy entrepreneurs' attempts to push through reforms in various policy domains in Russia have highlighted their variable rates of success. Gel'man and Starodubtsev (2016, 114) argue that reforms in Russia can only be successful if "a certain reform is the top political priority of the strong and authoritative head of state, and if a team of reformers has the opportunity to be insulated from the major interest groups, and if it

implements policy changes quickly and they bring immediate positive results.” This is borne out by analyses of recent reforms of the child welfare system in Russia, which indicate that child welfare became a priority for the state. This gave NGOs active in this field opportunities to have some input into the formulation of policy and legislation at the federal level (Bindman, Kulmala, and Bogdanova 2019) and the implementation of policy at the regional level (Bogdanova and Bindman 2016). In Russia, the federal government is responsible for setting the general principles and national standards for social policy, particularly the federal Ministry of Labour and Social Protection.¹ The president plays the key role in determining the direction of policy, particularly in areas with major budgetary implications such as social policy (Khmelnitskaya 2017). Policy implementation, however, is a responsibility of regional governments, which must pass the corresponding legislation and which have their own regional ministries for social protection, and municipal governments, which are responsible for the practical delivery of social services (Kulmala and Tarasenko 2016). In addition, Russia’s extensive system of social services and benefits is largely financed by regional budgets (Remington et al. 2013). These factors ensure that when it comes to the implementation of social policy in Russia, it is the regional level that matters most, and that allows NGOs the greatest opportunities to operate as policy entrepreneurs and build relationships with policy makers in regional legislatures as well as regional and municipal administrations. In Belarus, which is a much smaller and less complex polity than Russia, this domain is much more centralized and dominated by the state, which acts as the main agent of policy development, implementation, and evaluation. On the level of policy design and decision making, the president and his administration play major roles, but the Ministry of Labour and Social Protection and the corresponding departments in the local administrations at different levels have major control over policy implementation. The whole system is hierarchical, subordinated, and standardized, and as a result, for Belarusian NGOs the focus for their advocacy and lobbying efforts is the presidential administration and the national-level ministry. The windows of opportunity in the welfare sphere, which policy entrepreneurs can take advantage of, therefore occur at different points in the two case study countries: In Russia, these can occur at the federal level in terms of policy being developed and determined, and at the regional level in terms of policy being implemented and often adapted to local considerations. In Belarus, the opportunities at the national level exist during both policy development and implementation. This means that outcomes in Russia are likely to be

more widespread and diffuse, whereas in Belarus they are likely to be more limited in both scope and number.

Welfare Reform in Russia and Belarus: The Policy Context

At present Russia's welfare state encompasses a mix of public and private health care services, a residual system of unemployment protection, a basic safety net of social assistance for the poorest in society, and private markets in education and housing (Cerami 2009). Recent welfare reforms have seen the increased use of performance-related pay in the public sector and the "optimization" of the health care system, which has led to hospital closures and staff layoffs in a number of regions (Matveev 2016). Such reforms gained steam particularly in the context of the economic crisis of 2014–2016, which has led to a decline in household incomes and subsequent cuts to social spending on education, health care, and communal housing services (Khmelnitskaya 2017).² This trend builds on long-running programs of increased privatization in the child care and elderly care sectors. In addition, authorities have enthusiastically supported the policy of utilizing socially oriented NGOs (SONGOs) as service providers, with the government passing major legislation expanding their use in 2010 and 2015, and the Ministry for Economic Development spearheading funding programs of SONGOs at federal and regional levels since 2011 (Krasnopolskaya, Skokova, and Pape 2015). This has involved distributing direct federal and regional grants among SONGOs and improving the legal framework for them to participate in tenders for government and municipal service contracts. A state register of SONGOs was established in 2011, and these organizations are currently offered various funding schemes by the government: federal-level grants to support SONGOs,³ subsidies to cover utility payments made by SONGOs, and targeted funding for SONGOs from the regional and municipal authorities (Tarasenko 2018). A further innovation that is intended to increase competition and drive up quality in the delivery of previously state-run services is the use of competitive tenders for service delivery that registered commercial and noncommercial organizations can apply for. Under new legislation passed in 2012, all levels of government must use small and medium enterprises and SONGOs to provide 15 percent of the total annual value of their contracts for social service provisions (Benevolenski 2014). This policy has been determined at the very top of the political system, as is customary in

Russia where the president is the most powerful actor in the policy-making process (Khmelnitskaya 2017).

In contrast to Russia, Belarus is a state that, since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, has experienced relatively little reform in the political, economic, and social spheres (Pranevičiūtė-Neliupšienė et al. 2014; Wilson 2016). Due to favorable gas and oil prices and easily accessible credit from the country's main economic and political partner, Russia, the Belarusian president Aleksandr Lukashenko has been able to postpone unpopular reforms and conduct a generous populist social policy. The social contract with the population was based on the idea that the government would provide stability, order, a low level of social inequality, and a high (in fact almost total) level of employment, with the idea of the so-called "socially oriented" state acting as a cornerstone of the president's legitimacy. Until the mid-2000s, Belarusian social policy preserved the principles of Soviet-era universalistic welfare redistribution with social support for numerous groups. During this period more than half of the adult Belarusian population was eligible for social benefits of some kind (Chubrik et al. 2009). The state guaranteed the universal provision of social services and benefits, subsidies for utility costs, and control of consumer prices. Predominantly state-owned enterprises and state-controlled trade unions performed not only production and labor-market-oriented functions, but were also ascribed complex "social functions" such as providing jobs, building and maintaining social infrastructure, organizing leisure of employees and their families, engaging into community service, etc. (Chulitskaya and Matonyte 2018).

Beginning in the mid-2000s, however, due to economic pressures and a deteriorating demographic situation (with a continuing decline in the working-age population), Belarusian welfare policy drifted away from the Soviet paternalistic state-centered approach and its universal social security policy. One of the first changes was the abolition of universal social provisions and the introduction of a targeted social assistance approach in 2007 (Chubrik et al. 2009). As a result, the number of categories of people eligible for social benefits was reduced. But the scope of social support programs in Belarus remained broad (around 40 percent of the population in 2010), despite its more accurate targeting, which still allowed benefits to leak into households not below the poverty line. In addition, the list of socially vulnerable groups was not comprehensively revised, and it did not include some categories (for instance, temporarily unemployed or homeless people). Recent policy measures have included the redistribu-

tion of some social welfare responsibilities to nonstate actors such as NGOs serving narrower social groups, and the increased use of some neo-liberal instruments. Yet these changes remain shrouded in the discourse of a powerful paternalistic state providing generous social support to the population (Chulitskaya and Matonyte 2018).

In 2011 the idea of public-private partnership as a model of cooperation between the state and business was introduced in order to realize important social projects, and in December 2015 the Law on the Public-Private Partnership (N345-3) was adopted (Ministry of Economy 2019). NGOs are regarded as entities that are useful for assisting specific socially vulnerable groups such as children, large families on low incomes, and the disabled (Matonyte and Chulitskaya 2013; Chulitskaya and Matonyte 2018). In 2013 changes to the Law on Social Provision were adopted that established the mechanism of the so-called “social procurement order” or “social contracting.” According to this mechanism, “legal entities” (including NGOs) and individual entrepreneurs can apply for public funding from local authorities for the provision of social services or the realization of social projects. Social contracting is, however, currently applicable in just two spheres: social services provision and HIV prevention (Zuravskii and Mancurova 2018). In contrast to Russia, the outcomes of the introduction of social contracting in Belarus are as yet limited. According to the Ministry of Labor and Social Protection, in January 2019, there were just eighty-two social contracting agreements in Belarus (with an even smaller number of projects in previous years). In 2018, the amount of funding for social contracting provided by local authorities was the equivalent of around €300,000 (Belta 2019). One organization (the Belarusian Red Cross), which is a state-organized entity or GONGO, receives most of its funding through this mechanism. Other organizations that participate in social contracting are either Soviet-era organizations that help people with disabilities (for example, the Belarusian society for the people with disabilities) or more recently established “grassroots” NGOs for people with disabilities, such as the Belarusian Association for Assistance to Children and Young People with Disabilities (Belta 2019).

Data and Methods

Our analysis is based on a number of interviews conducted in various cities in Russia between 2015 and 2016 and in Minsk, Belarus, in 2018. A total of fifteen interviews were conducted with representatives of NGOs work-

ing with vulnerable groups such as the homeless, the elderly, and the disabled and with representatives of think tanks specializing in social policy in Moscow, St Petersburg, Nizhny Novgorod, Perm, and Kazan in Russia. A further nine interviews were conducted with NGOs based in Minsk, and three interviews were conducted with representatives of the municipal bureaucracy in Minsk responsible for delivering social services in the city. All interviews were conducted in Russian on the condition of anonymity and were then translated and coded by the authors. Rather than trying to capture a nationally representative sample of NGOs working in the field of social policy in both countries, we chose to focus on a specific type of organization working solely in the area of social service provision that also interacted with the authorities on some level and often had been involved in the “social contracting” process, even if they had been unsuccessful.

NGOs as Social Policy Entrepreneurs: Russia and Belarus Compared

That the implementation of social policies in Russia, including the outsourcing of social services to NGOs and commercial enterprises, takes place at the regional and municipal level gives “street-level bureaucrats” considerable influence over the extent to which a policy is realized in practice (Gel'man and Starodubtsev 2016). As a result, how “successful” a policy is outsourced depends greatly on the willingness of regional and municipal bureaucrats operating in the social sphere to work with NGOs and commercial enterprises and to award them service contracts. The NGOs and social policy experts who took part in this study all had extensive contact with bureaucrats that were responsible for service delivery in their regions, and some had joined the official register of socially oriented NGOs able to provide social services. Several were interested in applying, or had applied already, for tenders to provide services, although they had not been successful. Some pointed to the reluctance of these bureaucrats to engage with the new policy and their suspicion of working with non-state providers, but also to the increasing pressures on them to implement policies they are not qualified to deal with:

The law itself in many respects has a declaratory nature and the resolution of many issues is devolved to the regional level. The regions don't understand how to resolve these issues so out of habit they start to develop these opaque systems in order to avoid it or

deal with it. So, at the moment if you talk to a lot of regions where the network of social services is run only by the authorities you find that bureaucrats there see it as “how can we get the better of this law?” or “how can we survive this law?” So, they treat it as something entirely negative. (Marina, social policy consultant, think-tank, Perm, 2015)

Despite these bureaucratic obstacles, NGOs operating in the social policy sphere in Russia and working with vulnerable groups such as children, the disabled, the elderly, and the homeless in many respects occupy a more privileged position than NGOs focusing explicitly on more political or human-rights-based issues, the latter having been the target of punitive legislation over the course of the past decade (Daucé 2014). This situation can also be observed in China where service-oriented NGOs in the welfare sphere have more freedom to operate and receive more state support (Teets 2018). As mentioned previously, several federal laws and major grant programs at the presidential level have reinforced the idea that socially oriented NGOs can and should undertake greater responsibilities in the social sphere. In addition to involving these NGOs directly in social service provision by awarding them grants and tenders at the federal and regional levels, the Putin administration has been active in developing various cross-sectoral bodies that bring together various types of nonstate actors and policy makers. Currently more than sixty of the country's regions have public chambers (Stuvøy 2014) that play an important part in social life, mediating between conflicting groups, acting as platforms for discussions on social issues, coordinating local NGOs, and guaranteeing interaction between executive and legislative authorities and the wider public (Richter 2009a, 2009b; Stuvøy 2014; Olisova 2015). As institutions, public chambers have been heavily criticized for their lack of accountability and what is perceived to be an overly close relationship with the authorities (Richter 2009a). Evans (2010, 20), however, argues that “institutions that were created to provide feedback to the leaders may also serve as channels of appeal for citizens.” For NGOs, the regional public chambers and their assorted committees and specialized working groups can offer an important forum for developing contacts with local policy makers and putting forward policy recommendations that can sometimes lead to concrete results at the local level (Bogdanova and Bindman 2016). This leads to a window of opportunity emerging at the regional level in Russia, where NGOs can help define how a policy is implemented, even if they cannot influence the development and adoption of the initial

policy at the federal level. By establishing networks involving policy makers and working on issues of social service delivery, which are perceived as less sensitive and politicized, NGOs in authoritarian systems can still reshape policy makers' understanding of a particular problem and the range of solutions available to address it (Teets 2018).

Several of the NGOs interviewed for this study had been involved in various meetings organized by their regional public chamber and were positive about the opportunities these provided to access official contacts which might otherwise be closed to them:

There are roundtables organized by the regional public chamber and we can organize ones on prevention and on interagency cooperation for example. So, we meet there from time to time with the [regional] prosecutor's office, the police, the Investigations Committee and so on to discuss issues such as how to work together effectively to help victims and how to stop violence from happening. (Maria, women and children's NGO, Nizhniy Novgorod)

We work with the [regional] Public Chamber if our interests overlap. We have had roundtables there and also meetings which we've initiated ourselves. The Public Chamber together with the [regional] Ministry for Social Policy are happy to hold roundtables and to support and invite people on a regular basis. And I think there are results—the Ministry then decided to implement a program for young families and we were pleased because we were one of the organizations involved in this, and as a result we trained a lot of specialists from various state social service agencies and they gained a lot of knowledge and understanding. (Marina, children's charity, Nizhniy Novgorod)

One respondent, who had spent a long period working directly for the regional public chamber as well as running an NGO, expressed the view that much depended on the ability of NGOs themselves to seize the initiative regarding opportunities provided by the chamber for high-level contacts and discussions with other local organizations, rather than passively appealing to it for help:

Different organizations come to the chamber's discussion fora and talk about the problems they are facing. In general, it seems to me

that the chamber is fulfilling its functions well in terms of uniting people. Anyone can bring up a problem, but in order to resolve it you need to include people who can achieve this. That's why we held our congress with the support of the chamber—the chamber gave it a specific status and the possibility to hold talks with state bodies on a higher level. (Natasha, disability NGO, Kazan)

A further way that allows NGOs to gain access to policy makers is by participation in public councils attached to federal and regional ministries. This was initially mandated by a presidential decree in 2011 and prompted the proliferation of public councils in the federal and regional offices of virtually all government agencies, departments, and services (Owen and Bindman 2019). In 2014 new laws prescribed the establishment of “instruments of public oversight,” or expert councils, in all regions at all levels of executive power, in regional legislative bodies, and with the obligatory inclusion of NGOs as members of these councils. The stated motivation behind the new legislation was that civic participation should be enacted through public consultative bodies (Dmitrieva and Styrin 2014, 63; Owen 2016). The legislation also decreed the establishment of special public councils to independently evaluate the quality of social services at the federal, regional executive/legislative, and municipal levels (Olisova 2015, 10). Many of the respondents from the NGOs involved in this study had participated regularly in these councils, particularly at the regional and municipal levels, and several were positive about the opportunity these bodies gave them for influencing the implementation of policy in their specific area of expertise:

Virtually all government departments have an advisory council which includes representatives of different social sector NGOs. Any transport issue which might have implications for disabled people cannot be decided without the opinion of social sector NGOs. This cooperation between social organizations and the authorities is well-established and can only continue to improve—ours has plenty of influence. (Alla, disability NGO, Moscow)

We work with the regional Ministry of Education and the city administration and they are very happy to work with us. We've been here for nine years so we've built close relations with them and we are a trusted partner. (Sveta, children's charity, Nizhniy Novgorod)

As these responses demonstrate, a further “window of opportunity” opened as legislation surrounding the creation of instruments of public oversight changed and government’s interest in involving NGOs in the provision of social services to specific vulnerable groups increased. Socially oriented NGOs in Russia have been able to take advantage of this window to involve themselves directly in meetings and discussions with policy makers to put the issues they wish to highlight and their proposed solutions on the agenda at the municipal and regional levels of government, which is where the actual details of social policy are often decided on. A further, and equally important, reason for NGOs’ effectiveness in this setting is that they are respected for the knowledge and expertise they can bring to the discussion of complex issues relating to social policy and social service delivery, areas that are of crucial importance to the legitimacy of Russia’s regime (Khmelnitskaya 2017). In this sense, they conform to Kingdon (2014) and Cairney’s (2018) concept of policy entrepreneurs as persistent, well-connected members of a particular policy community with specialist knowledge of their policy area capable of using certain strategies to advance their policy solutions. As Teets (2018) points out, in China, NGOs often act as “expert” consultants to policy makers, particularly in areas where the state lacks expert capacity or sufficient information to tackle a particular issue. Several respondents highlighted this role, pointing to the numerous invitations they received from the authorities to offer their expert opinion and to train members of the regional and municipal administrations:

We work quite closely with regional governments so we’ve got partnerships at the moment with the Leningrad Oblast authorities, with St. Petersburg, various rayons [districts] of St. Petersburg, and we work at the city level as well. We’ve also got discussions going on in Moscow and we have quite a lot of requests for support in developing services but also training and education from various regions. (Lyuda, children’s charity manager, St. Petersburg)

We work very actively with all the relevant agencies so that’s the [regional] Ministry of Education, the [regional] Ministry for Social Policy and so on. And they invite us as experts to seminars all the time. (Marina, children’s charity, Nizhniy Novgorod)

In the case of Belarus, the creation of “windows of opportunity” is in some respects similar to that in Russia, but it also has some crucial differ-

ences. In addition to being a much smaller country with a far smaller number of active NGOs, a further key difference is that, as our respondents argued, social policy and the welfare sphere are still seen as being monopolized by the big state:

The state has practically a total monopoly in the sphere of essential social services provision. . . . The state social protection system consumes almost 99 percent of the national budget. (Andrey, disability NGO, Minsk)

The outcome of this monopoly is an absence of alternative actors, particularly commercial enterprises, in this sphere. This situation is exacerbated by the fact that even though new legislation has tried to promote public-private partnerships in the social sphere, the financial conditions proposed by the state for contracting out social services are evaluated by municipal officials themselves as not sufficient to raise interest of entrepreneurs:

The money on offer is not big enough to attract business. It is extremely difficult to generate any profit while providing social services. (Sergey, representative of the Minsk City district administration)

Other respondents from the NGO sector and the expert community, in contrast, expressed a relatively optimistic vision of the changes in Belarusian social policy in recent years and attributed these changes to the advocacy work of Belarusian NGOs active in the social sphere:

In reality, during the last twenty years we see a big transformation of the social system, which happens due to the advocacy actions of the NGOs, which raise urgent problems and tell [the authorities] about drawbacks in the sphere. (Aleksey, disability NGO, Minsk)

In contrast to the now well-established interactions between Russian SONGOs and municipal and regional authorities through advisory councils and regional public chambers, virtually the only existing opportunity for Belarusian alternative actors to participate in welfare provision is through the relatively new system of social contracting mentioned by all respondents. The evaluation of the quality of NGOs-state relations in this context, however, was quite different from the Russian case. In contrast to

the views of the Russian NGOs interviewed, several of the Belarusian respondents were quite negative about the capacity of Belarusian NGOs to provide high-quality social services, arguing that they did not have sufficient skills or experience and could not deal with public funding, management, and accountability. As a result, the overwhelming majority of alternative actors could not be involved in social contracting.

[W]hen the window [of opportunity] opens and they [NGOs] should provide their shoulders to the state, it appears to be that the [third] sector in the sphere of social services is not ready [to help]. They couldn't even define, describe the service which they provide. (Maria, social policy consultant, Minsk)

One representative of the Minsk district administration also argued that it is difficult for NGOs to deal with the public guidelines for alternative providers and expressed the view that NGOs are in principle ready to participate in social contracting but do not have experience in managing public funding:

You know, frankly speaking, they are ready to work, but they'd rather prefer that public institutions—the department of social security [of the local administration]—prepare everything for them. I mean, all the legal and other documents. On such conditions they are ready. They lack the experience to work within the public administration system, with public funding and so on.

Several respondents also highlighted the need for more trust and respect between the authorities and NGOs working in the social sector and argued that this would require changes in attitudes on both sides:

When the services are provided to the state by NGOs using state money, we build quite different relations. The relations should be in the form of partnership and respect. (social policy consultant, Minsk)

There exists a high level of distrust from the state toward NGOs as well as vice versa. The state likes to blame the third sector, saying that we are not active enough, but I understand rather well why we are not active enough. (Alisa, veterans' support NGO, Minsk)

This indicates that in contrast to the Russian case, relations between socially oriented NGOs and the authorities in Belarus are at a much more preliminary phase of development. NGOs in Belarus lack the mechanisms and opportunities for discussion and cooperation with policy makers at the regional and local level that Russian socially oriented NGOs can make use of. Nevertheless, the system of social contracting does seem to offer some Belarusian NGOs the possibility of cooperating with the state. One respondent with experience with the contracting process claimed that,

We came to an agreement with the local administration [about social contracting] quite fast. The dialogue passed smoothly, and we were able to assure [the administration] that the category [of people we work with] is indeed in need, we have to work with them, and the funding would become a good support. (Katya, family support NGO, Minsk)

Some NGOs, including this respondent, saw social contracting as a window of opportunity, an experimental platform for the development of good practice in state–civil society relations. They saw the successful development of such a small instrument as a cornerstone for future successful cooperation:

Providing public money for NGOs by the state—it is not just money, but the change in how the state relates to NGOs. And as a result, if we could change relations within this small issue, it would be easier to promote other issues as well: foreign assistance, sponsorship, charity, and so on. (Katya, family support NGO, Minsk)

Another respondent saw these and other changes in Belarusian social policy as a marker of certain changes in attitudes within the state toward alternative actors. She highlighted the importance of more cases of good practices as a tool to “reassure” the state that cooperation with nonstate organizations is useful:

I feel that the state is ready [to cooperate with NGOs]. But until it understands for sure that there are no tricks and it doesn’t see a concrete mechanism; it would be afraid. . . . And every time it sees concrete cases [of positive actions of NGOs] the situation will be changing. (Raisa, charitable foundation, Minsk)

As can be seen in Russia, social policy in Belarus constitutes an important part of President Lukashenka's legitimacy, but it has never undergone full-scale reforms, with welfare provision remaining one of the main priorities of the political regime. From the point of view of the involved actors and in contrast to some of the views expressed by the Russian respondents in our study, Belarusian social policy is still centralized and dominated by the state. As a result, the opportunities for NGOs to build networks involving policy makers and to have input into policy implementation are more limited than in the Russian case given the more closed nature of the political system in Belarus and how underdeveloped the nonprofit sector is. But the more recent changes introduced addressing contracting create a window of opportunity for nonstate actors (NGOs in particular) to (a) become formal providers of social services and (b) act as policy entrepreneurs and put forward their issues of concern and their proposals for resolving them, particularly since, as in Russia, they are able to occupy the position of "experts" who can provide much-needed technical knowledge and information.

Conclusion

Our findings indicate that the conditions of post-Soviet authoritarianism offer certain opportunities for nonstate actors operating at the national and regional levels in Russia and Belarus to influence policy development in certain privileged domains of social policy that are less politicized than others but remain highly important in terms of regime credibility and legitimacy. NGOs working in the area of social policy and social service delivery in both countries occupy a middle ground where they do not act in opposition to the authorities but also have (largely) not been fully coopted by them. Their status as "experts" offers them certain input into the system as the state needs what they have to offer in an area of policy that has a significant impact on the daily lives and well-being of the population. This enables them to act as policy entrepreneurs and take advantage of windows of opportunity that open in the social policy sphere to advance their ideas and proposals through the formation of networks involving policy makers. This phenomenon is currently more pronounced in Russia than in the more centralized and authoritarian system in Belarus, but even there NGOs point to changes in this direction in the sphere of social policy, even if they remain gradual and limited for now. Ultimately,

what happens at the regional level in both countries is often the real test of whether NGOs can influence policy outcomes as well as development, and in both cases it seems that they have some opportunity to be successful and that such opportunities are likely to increase in the future.

Our findings correspond with those in the next two chapters, as far as groups having more space in the policy areas central to regime-legitimation claims. For example, using a large-N analysis in chapter 12, Angelo Vito Panaro also finds that regime-legitimation strategies centering on socio-economic performance and nominally democratic institutions require technical and political information that groups may supply, encouraging autocrats to develop more institutions for consultation. This suggests that interest groups' degree of policy influence varies depending on the discursive strategies autocrats deploy to legitimate their rule, with the performance-based and democratic-procedural legitimation appeals deployed by "informational autocrats" (Guriev and Treisman 2020) being associated with more access. As discussed in the volume conclusion, three conditions of advocacy under authoritarianism shape all stages of influence production: access to policy making, information demands, and social control. In this analysis of welfare provision in Russia and Belarus, we find that groups' access to information and expertise needed for regime-legitimation claims allow them to participate in policy making and shape specific policy outcomes.

NOTES

1. Ministry of Labour and Social Protection, <https://rosmintrud.ru/>.
2. <https://www.gazeta.ru/business/2015/10/07/7809035.shtml>.
3. Ministry of Economic Development of the Russian Federation, 2019.

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