

From the *Slavic Review* Editorial Board:

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To the Editor:

We are writing to express our dismay concerning the article by Julie Hemment entitled “Nashi, Youth Voluntarism, and Potemkin NGOs: Making Sense of Civil Society in Post-Soviet Russia” (vol. 71, no. 2). Certainly, people can have differing views about any organization—particularly one as controversial as Nashi; nevertheless, in a scholarly journal, at least, those views should be grounded in a reasonable representation of the historical as well as the current political context. Yet, one can find fault with the author regarding each of the major themes of this article: the characterization of NGOs; the definition of civil society; and the philosophical underpinnings and practical impact of the youth organization known as Nashi.

NGOs: In developed societies the understanding of what constitutes an NGO is very simple: “non-profit, voluntary, organizations that carry [out] a broad range of social development functions with and on behalf of people” and whose programs “emanate more from the expressed needs of people rather than from governments.” Most NGOs are seen as “powerful sources for social change” that have “targeted their efforts toward population groups that tend to be underserved by governmental programs, including women, the aged, physically and mentally disabled persons, the poor, as well as various social groups that have been ‘marginalized’ by virtue of race, religion, ethnicity, caste, social class, etc.” (from Richard Estes at the University of Pennsylvania, at [www.sp2.upenn.edu/restes/isw/chapter34.html](http://www.sp2.upenn.edu/restes/isw/chapter34.html) (last accessed 5 December 2012)).

The notion of “government sponsored NGOs” is not only an oxymoron, it is widespread only in places that are poor, underdeveloped, and governed in a dictatorial or authoritarian manner: Zimbabwe, Egypt, and Russia come to mind. For the author, however, such NGOs are accepted not only as the norm, but also as the equivalent of entities like the Ford Foundation, International Research and Exchanges Board, the MacArthur Foundation, and the Open Society Institute. These western organizations, among others, did indeed make a concerted effort to support fledgling groups throughout the Warsaw Pact area as soon as the opportunity presented itself following the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Given the impoverished populace in these countries and the utter lack of domestic corporations—to say nothing of any tradition of corporate philanthropy—no groups that a westerner would recognize as an NGO or social service organization could possibly have survived in post-Soviet space without the financial support of major philanthropic institutions. But these western charitable and educational institutions cannot be blamed for the predations of Jef-

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frey Sachs and his Harvard mafia in the 1990s (who by all accounts perpetrated an insider trading scandal that would make even Wall Street blush) or for the Bush White House's distortion of democracy building a decade later. Nor should they be blamed when, after several years of massive financial support in Russia, they shifted their funding to other Eurasian countries. Indeed, as a matter of policy the Soros Foundation explicitly set time limits for its support since its goal was to provide seed money to nascent NGOs and grassroots organizations while they developed other means of generating the funding needed to deliver their services.

*Civil Society:* Hemment displays a prodigious grasp of ethnographic scholarship about post-Soviet space, but she seems almost completely oblivious to the extensive political science and speech communication literature regarding civil society. Standard (western) notions of civil society emphasize "elements such as freedom of speech, an independent judiciary, etc., that make up a democratic society" (see [www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/civil-society](http://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/civil-society), last accessed 5 December 2012) or the "strong conceptual association between the notion of civil society and self-governance through voluntary relations of association" (this description comes from Mark Warren at Georgetown University in "Civil Society and Good Governance," which was published as part of the U.S. Civil Society Project funded by the Ford Foundation, see [www9.georgetown.edu/faculty/wilcox/CivilSociety.pdf](http://www9.georgetown.edu/faculty/wilcox/CivilSociety.pdf), last accessed 5 December 2012). True to western traditions, the Soros Foundation—which through seed grants initiated programs around the world to foster, inter alia, academic debate as a genuine democracy-building effort and a complementary scholarly publication entitled *Controversia: An International Journal of Debate and Democratic Renewal*—clearly believes that civil society can exist only in pluralistic settings and that argumentation, free speech, and the ability of citizens to criticize their government are the foundations of pluralistic (democratic) societies.

Thus, when Vladimir Putin speaks of *civil society* within the context of a "managed" or "sovereign" *democracy*, he is clearly distorting the accepted meaning of both concepts. One thinks, by analogy, of the German *Democratic Republic*. Hemment fails to understand that by tolerating the murder of activists like Anna Politkovskaia and Sergei Magnitskii, by stifling freedom of expression, freedom of the press, and freedom of association, and by continuing to countenance rampant corruption throughout Russia, Putin makes a mockery of the word *democracy*—which he trots out only to mollify western governments.

*Nashi:* While it is undoubtedly true that some sincere, committed young people have been energized by their membership in Nashi and that Nashi may conduct some laudable initiatives (although pledging to fight the corrupt generation that controls Russian society while, at the same time, claiming obeisance to Putin does seem disingenuous at best), it is astounding that Hemment should view this government-backed group of street thugs as a benign organization. The liberal democratic opposition in Russia knows better, and so should she. Nashi claims to oppose all fascists, but its operational definition of that term encompasses any person, organization, movement, or foreign entity that is not unwaveringly and uncritically supportive of Putin.

To call Nashi a "government sponsored NGO" is intellectually dishonest. One might as well use the same designation to characterize Hezbollah because it feeds the poor in southern Lebanon and provides educational opportunities in Gaza.

Nashi may have been the 2005 brainchild of Vladimir Surkov, but its predecessor organization was founded in 2001 by none other than Putin himself. Since at least September 2009 the group has commonly been referred to as "Putin Jugend." Indeed, an article posted on the Ekho Moskvyy Web site entitled "Putiniugend na marshe" was immediately reposted on the Web site of the opposition political party Iabloko (see [www.echo.msk.ru/blog/alex\\_melnikov\\_yabloko/623586-echo/](http://www.echo.msk.ru/blog/alex_melnikov_yabloko/623586-echo/) and [www.yabloko.ru/](http://www.yabloko.ru/)

publications/2009/09/30, last accessed 5 December 2012). Moreover, the Russian-language newspaper *The Moscow Post*, which is published in Ukraine, routinely refers to the organization as Nashisti. Anyone who understands Russian knows exactly what they mean.

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Professor Hemment responds:

In their letter, Michael K. Launer, David Cratis Williams, and Marilyn J. Young fault me on three grounds: my characterization of NGOs; the definition of civil society; and the philosophical underpinnings and practical impact of Nashi.

I am well aware of the normative definitions of NGOs and civil society the authors point to, however, these definitions bear little resemblance to the projects that have been enacted in the region (or anywhere else, for that matter). The authors' objections suggest a fundamental misreading of my argument. I am stepping outside a normative framework of evaluative assessment in order to understand the specific structural and ideological forms NGOs assume in specific locales. Further, as an ethnographer, my task has been to examine NGOs, not as ideal types, or in terms of what they intend to accomplish, but in terms of what they delivered—the social fact of NGOs.

Contra the authors' assertion that the understanding of NGO is "simple," I argue for the instability of this social form. My point of departure is that "NGOs" and "civil society" are contested political symbols and ideological signifiers, not objective descriptors. What an NGO does is not clear-cut, nor can we expect it to fulfill in any pure way a political mission; it is shaped by existing power relations and competing interests on the ground. Analytically therefore, the normative approach falls far short of capturing actual practice. To undertake an analysis of form, structure, and effects, we need to move outside the binary of good/evil and to be far less certain of our definitions of what counts.

The authors assert that, "Most NGOs are seen as 'powerful sources for social change.'" But they do not ask—as seen by whom? Not by many Russian people, who regard them as self-interested vehicles for tax avoidance at best, or (especially since the color revolutions) as malign presences that seek to reshape Russian society in alignment with foreign interests at worst (the authors' distinction between Jeffrey Sachs's Harvard "mafia" and agencies such as Soros's Open Society Foundation is only possible with the benefit of hindsight, and many Russians do not make the same distinction). Indeed, the organizational forms donor agencies encouraged in the former Soviet Union during the 1990s were replete with contradictions. As Ruth Mandel has shown, oxymoronic formations such as government-organized NGOs (or "GONGOs" as development practitioners refer to them) were actually stimulated by U.S. donor activity, brought into being by these organizations' funding requirements (Mandel, "Seeding Civil Society," in C. M. Hann, ed., *Postsocialism: Ideals, Ideologies and Practices in Eurasia* [London, 2002], 279–96).

I do not question the *intentions* of agencies like the Open Society or Ford Foundation or of the people who staff them; what interests me are their (often unintended) effects, shaped by the historical and political economic context within which they are located. Indeed, it was my grounded research in Russia during the 1990s—undertaken