Nonprofits as a Source of Regime Stability

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# 1. Abstract

This paper discloses the functions of the nonprofit sector in non-Western democratic national contexts. Based on recent processes that can hardly be analyzed in the normative paradigm of “good” civil society, authors pose the following question. If civil society is not always a contribution to democratization, then what other functions does it perform in nondemocratic contexts? The paper analyzes the societal functions of civil society in authoritarian regimes and argue that authoritarian political regimes use nonprofits to prolong stay in power and do so through three pillars of repression, co-optation, and legitimation (Gerschewski, 2013), and with five patterns of regime legitimation (Lorch & Bunk, 2017).

Based on the case of Russia and secondary data, the authors show how these pillars are applied in practice and how they affect and divide the nonprofit sector. Data illustrates that authoritarian regimes as Russian do not simply repress all nonprofits as one might expect. Instead, the regimes seek to take advantage of what nonprofits are doing and, restrain NPOs that undermine regime resilience. At the same time authoritarian regimes use nonprofits for legitimation purposes in the settings. By picturing NPOs as a facade of democracy and as a feedback mechanism, by establishing GONGOs, and by appropriating nonprofits’ outcomes, the Russian regime enhance its legitimacy in the eyes of society. Thus, we claim that authoritarian regimes do not use only traditional political institutions like legislatures, elections, and political parties for stabilization as the classical political science literature postulates. They also use the nonprofit sector.

# 2. Introduction

Civil society and democracy have traditionally been perceived as inseparable, with the former having an ability to democratize different parts of the world (White, 1994). Following Tocqueville’s and Putnam’s logic, the normative understanding of civil society as a “good society” that promotes equality and tolerance, builds social capital, and contributes to democratization has dominated for a long time. In this framework, civil society and its organizations make contributions to the democratic process by being a “school of democracy” in which people learn political skills and develop civic virtues, by pluralizing the institutional arena, by giving voice and representation to different actors, and, finally, by checking state power, specifically its potential abuses and violations (Fung, 2003; Mercer, 2002).

In fact, in the 1990s, the prevailing position was that democracy and an open, free civil society were “the end of history” (Fukuyama, 1992). However, subsequent global processes of increasing authoritarianism and the emergence of new forms of hybrid political regimes (Levitsky & Way, 2010) raise the question of whether and how civil society is possible in such a contested and dividing context (Cavatorta, 2015). Recently scholars have claimed that civil society has a limited ability to restrain modern forms of “updated” and consolidated authoritarianism (Kalandadze & Orenstein, 2009). Moreover, both in authoritarian regimes and in countries undergoing democracy backsliding, the number of right-wing movements, pro-government rallies, and GONGOs (governmental-organized nongovernmental organizations) is growing (Atalay, 2018; Cianetti et al., 2018; Hasmath et al., 2019; Hellmeier & Weidmann, 2020; Hemment, 2012; Matchanka, 2014; Strachwitz & Toepler, 2022; Zhao & Lilly, 2021). These processes can hardly be analyzed in the normative paradigm of “good” civil society. If civil society is not a contribution to democratization, then what other functions does it perform in nondemocratic contexts?

In this chapter, we shift from the normative approach and adhere to the organizational understanding of civil society as a set of formal and informal/nonstate nonprofit organizations that pursue a social mission. We do not associate civil society and nonprofits exclusively with the democratic values of inclusion and equality. As Cavatora (2015) has written, “Neutrality of values ensures that one should analyze the component parts of civil society (groups and organizations) by highlighting their ethos, their activities and their commitment, or lack of, to democratic practices” (p. 5). Framing things in this way allows us to take a positivist look at ongoing processes and to analyze the societal functions of civil society in authoritarian regimes, in which the accepted logic about contributions to democratization might not work.

Authoritarian regimes do not simply repress all nonprofits as one might expect. Instead they seek to take advantage of what nonprofit organizations (NPOs) are doing and, more obviously, restrain NPOs that undermine regime resilience. They accomplish this mainly through two methods: first, by supporting organizations that provide social services to the population, and second, by restricting advocacy of rights-based NPOs (Daucé, 2014; Hu & Guo, 2016; Jing, 2015; Njoku, 2022; Popplewell, 2018; Skokova et al., 2018; Toepler et al., 2020). By ascribing service results to their own success and limiting competition for securing political dominance, authoritarian regimes enhance their legitimacy in the eyes of society. In this sense, we claim that authoritarian regimes do not use only traditional political institutions like legislatures, elections, and political parties for stabilization as the classical political science literature postulates (Gerschewski, 2013). They also use the nonprofit sector.

Scholars have observed that authoritarian regimes rely on three pillars to maintain regime stability: repression, co-optation, and legitimation (Gerschewski, 2013). These pillars are relevant for understanding why and how the nonprofit sector exists in the authoritarian context. However, this framework has rarely, if ever, been considered in conjunction with the role of the nonprofit sector. A significant amount of research has been devoted to the question of how an authoritarian state shrinks the civic space and uses repression and restrictive legislation to keep politically critical parts of civil society at a safe distance (Dupuy et al., 2015; Flikke, 2018; Gilbert, 2020). At the same time, scholars have noted the growing number of ways in which authoritarian states financially support social welfare NPOs. By providing this financial support, the state replaces illegitimate foreign funding and co-opts nonprofits (Enjuto Martinez et al., 2022; Fröhlich & Skokova, 2020; Jing, 2015; Krasnopolskaya et al., 2015; Spires, 2020). Also, scholars have shown that nondemocracies use civil society to strengthen regime legitimization by picturing NPOs as a façade of democracy, using civil society as a feedback mechanism, and ascribing their output to state success, among other things (Lorch & Bunk, 2017).

In this chapter, we bring together the literature on the three pillars (repression, co-optation, legitimation) of authoritarian regime stability (Gerschewski, 2013) and patterns of regime legitimation (Lorch & Bunk, 2017), emphasizing the role of NPOs in these processes. Our main contributions relate to a different perspective on NPOs in an authoritarian context. We claim that nonprofits are not limited to being objects of governmental policy but also play a significant role in regime stabilization, which is the core function of NPOs operating under an authoritarian regime. We briefly reassess and summarize the current literature and then apply the framework to the case of Russia, which serves as an example of a post-Soviet state with a strong Soviet legacy where democratization processes have failed (Evans, 2011), authoritarianism has consolidated over the years (Gel’man, 2015), and the question of the nonprofit sector has become strategic for the regime’s stability.

# 3. Nonprofits as a source of regime stability

Civil society and the nonprofit sector have a wide range of functions. They mobilize for collective action and advocate for social change, provide social services, represent and empower diverse social groups, attract public interest to social problems, and monitor state agencies. What are the ultimate societal consequences of these functions? The traditional answer is that they enhance democracy, suggesting that a strong civil society leads to strong democracy, and vice versa. But what happens in authoritarian regimes when civil society exists in a contested environment with limited opportunities for effecting change and challenging the state? Based on the literature on state–civil society relations under nondemocratic regimes and our own research on Russia, we claim that the core societal function of civil society and the nonprofit sector in an authoritarian context is maintaining regime stability.

Our argument rests on the observation that power relations between the state and civil society are inequal because the former maintains absolute control over decision making. Nondemocratic regimes provide far fewer opportunities for nonstate actors to advocate for and enact social change. This puts civil society in a truly secondary position and limits the range of functions it is able to perform. Using both co-optive and repressive methods, authoritarian regimes have the power to regulate the strength and structure of civil society and strategically use civil society for their own purposes of gaining and maintaining regime stability. We claim that authoritarian regimes use civil society as another political institution to prolong their stay in power and do so through repression, co-optation, and legitimation (Gerschewski, 2013).

Repression is the most common and the most studied tactic used by authoritarian regimes. To maintain regime stability, authoritarian states limit the power of oppositional political forces and, generally, anyone who can undermine and question their legitimacy. Nonprofits, especially those that work in the contested fields of human rights, civic education, and electoral monitoring, are the first to be limited. After the “color revolutions,” post-Soviet and other nondemocratic countries turned their attention to the political role of NPOs, viewing them as an important driving force in mobilizing the protest movement and as a threat to regime stability (Gilbert, 2020). Since then, legal regulation has become the main tactic for keeping claim-making NPOs under control (Spires, 2020). This legal regulation includes not only constructing formal barriers to NPO registration and requiring extensive reporting but also restricting foreign funding and labeling NPOs who continue to rely on foreign funding as illegitimate “foreign agents” (Flikke, 2018).

Restricting foreign funding is a commonly used tactic by many types of regimes. According to Dupuy et al. (2015), by 2012, “44% of countries (86 of 195) [had] adopted legislation that specifically restrict[ed] foreign NPOs and/or foreign funding flows” (p. 423). Among them are not only the well-known cases of Russia (Flikke, 2018) and Egypt (Herrold, 2016); Israel, Canada, Australia, and India (Bromley et al., 2020; Carothers & Brechenmacher, 2014) also implemented measures to limit foreign funding for nonprofits for the same reason: to preserve “national security” (Katz & Gidron, 2022, p. 239) and to abolish the “threat of foreign interference undermining democratic processes” (Matejova et al., 2018, p. 9–10).

However, authoritarian regimes cannot rely only on the repressive pillar for their longevity. Indeed, the state also needs to cooperate with NPOs who can work for it and stay in the depoliticized line of state welfare functions. Co-optation, meaning “the capacity to tie strategically-relevant actors (or a group of actors) to the regime elite” (Gerschewski, 2013, p. 22), is the second pillar of authoritarian regime stability. The state is strategically interested in nonprofits and their leaders. Nonprofits provide social services and solve numerous social problems that the government has failed to solve. The state support of “politically inactive and professionally capable” NPOs (Jing, 2015, p. 589) guarantees that civil society actors continue social welfare activities without challenging the status quo.

Authoritarian states use a rich variety of co-optation tactics, such as providing financial support to socially oriented nonprofits (Bederson & Semenov, 2021; Enjuto Martinez et al., 2022; Jing, 2015; Krasnopolskaya et al., 2015; Spires, 2020; Zhang, 2015) and involving NPOs in consultative bodies (Ljubownikow & Crotty, 2016; Owen, 2020; Pape & Skokova, 2022; Teets, 2013; Zhang, 2018). They even support politically neutral research on nonprofits (Ma, 2022), which gives them more data about the state of the sector used for better control over the nonprofit sector and its development.

In sum, while restricting claim-making NPOs and NPOs that support social welfare, the authoritarian state uses “regulation as political control” (Spires, 2020) that restructures civil society (Skokova et al., 2018), makes it more manageable (Ljubownikow & Crotty, 2017; Plantan, 2022), and shrinks the space for advocacy and activism (Toepler et al., 2020).

The third pillar of authoritarian regime stability is legitimation. Following the Weberian tradition, achieving political legitimacy is understood as a process of gaining support that is justified and accepted by society. Lorch and Bunk (2017), studying Algeria and Mozambique, suggested five ways authoritarian regimes strategically use civil society for legitimation purposes. This framework was later used for studying other authoritarian countries such as Vietnam (Wischermann et al., 2018), Venezuela, and Bolivia (Reaves, 2018), with many similarities among them.

The first way authoritarian regimes use legitimation is by holding up civil society as a facade of democracy. For both domestic and international audiences, the growth of volunteering and social welfare nonprofits is portrayed as a sign of functioning democracy. Authoritarian states use GONGOs (Hasmath et al., 2019; Hemment, 2012; Hsu, 2010; Hsu & Jiang, 2015; Matchanka, 2014), state-mobilized volunteering (Zhao & Lilly, 2021), and pro-government rallies (Hellmeier & Weidmann, 2020) to show support from below and demonstrate regime legitimacy. By allowing NPO registration, authoritarian states also signal to the international audience that they are “conforming to a global discourse on civil society” (Lorch & Bunk, 2017, p. 990) and liberalization.

The second way authoritarian governments use civil society for legitimation purposes is by “making civil society play by the rules.” Doing so relies on NPOs being embedded into bureaucratic networks. To do their work, NPOs need to cooperate with the state and follow its rules (Lorch & Bunk, 2017; Reaves, 2018). Whatever restrictive legal amendments are applied, nonprofits are compelled to follow them in order to secure their social mission and realize the interests of their beneficiaries. For instance, in the authoritarian context of China, “compliance with state norms becomes synonymous with organizational competence” (Tian & Chuang, 2022, p. 509). Where the skill of organizational survival requires a highly developed sense of the permitted and prohibited and the ability to maneuver in a complicated context, this compliance can be perceived as a sign of professionalism.

Next, authoritarian regimes use civil society as a mechanism of limited participation and a feedback mechanism. Nonprofits participate in various councils and advisory boards, which helps the state stay informed about social grievances and harness professional expertise in social policy. Although NPOs can successfully use these opportunities as “limited indirect advocacy tactics,” (Ljubownikow & Crotty, 2016), their designed role in pseudo-democratic institutions is to legitimize the decision-making process (Lorch & Bunk, 2017; Reaves, 2018; Toepler et al., 2020). Sharing responsibility with NPOs makes outcome decisions seem more legitimate (Wischermann et al., 2016, 2018).

Fourth, rulers provide core social services and guarantee an appropriate quality of life in exchange for the loyalty of the ruled (Geddes & Zaller, 1989). Lorch and Bunk (2017) have argued that authoritarian regimes are interested in utilizing NPO outputs to demonstrate their own achievements. Where NPOs enhance the delivery of social services or support the implementation of official policies, they increase the authoritarian regime’s legitimacy.

Finally, nonprofits strengthen the state’s official discourse. As Lewis (2013) showed, authoritarian regimes tend to rely on conservative, traditionalist, and fundamentalist values, and local civil society plays an important role in reproducing this discourse. They can support patriarchal gender norms (Wischermann et al., 2016), fundamentalist religious values (Atalay, 2018), and militarism (Alava, 2021; Fröhlich & Skokova, 2020). In addition, NPOs in authoritarian contexts avoid using alternative discourses and self-censor to minimize potential conflict with officials (Lorch & Bunk, 2017).

This review shows that authoritarian regimes are quite inventive in finding effective sources and tools for maintaining long-term stability. Civil society and the nonprofit sector play an important role in this process. On the one hand, claims-making NPOs can challenge the status quo, shaking political stability. In this case, the regime’s reaction would be repressive, aimed at limiting the power of critical civil society. On the other hand, as NPOs support authoritarian regimes in the implementation of the welfare function, they can be an active pro-government voice and enhance the legitimacy of the state in the eyes of the population. The three pillars of authoritarian regime stability work together, making their cumulative effect stronger. Longstanding authoritarianism relies on all three pillars of stability simultaneously. Based on the case of Russia, we show how these pillars are applied in practice and how they affect and divide the nonprofit sector.

# 4. The Russian case: an application

The case of Russia is useful for understanding how the nonprofit sector operates in a contested context. After the collapse of the Soviet Union in the 1990s, NPOs were supported by international donors while local government was ambivalent about the demand for nonprofit sector development (Skokova et al., 2018). When Putin came into power, the notion of domestic civil society became a more relevant policy field. During the 2000s, the Russian government began drafting an institutional framework to “manage” civil society (Ljubownikow & Crotty, 2017) that become more visible in the years that followed (Stuvøy, 2014). Today, the Russian case represents the most prominent example of how an “updated” authoritarian regime or hybrid regime strategically uses civil society as a source of stabilization. After discussing the theory of nonprofits as a source of regime stability, we answer the question of how and why NPOs operate in Russia.

 Classics of repression and co-optation. Authoritarian regimes manage NPOs through repression and co-optation. The Russian government has a history of enacting restrictive initiatives intended to limit financial and institutional opportunities for nonprofits working in the contested areas of human rights and advocacy (Crotty et al., 2014; Flikke, 2018). The nonprofit sector is clearly divided about how or whether to challenge the state; NPOs who do challenge the state face significant restrictions.

In Russia, the legislation on foreign agents (2012), the subsequent law on “undesirable organizations” (2015), and recent legislative additions (2022) allow the state to grant foreign agent status to an individual. This status is assigned to NPOs and individuals who receive foreign funding and are involved in very loosely defined political activity or information distribution. Being assigned foreign agent status entails significant bureaucratic and financial restrictions as well as fines. If an agent does not meet all the restrictions, they might be subject to additional fines or criminal prosecution. Through these laws, the state and the Ministry of Justice have developed a lever of influence over the work of nonprofits and individuals. The difficulties of withdrawing the status in court as well as the threat of criminal prosecution prevent nonprofits from challenging the law, which maintains the image of legitimacy of governmental repression.

Another recent example of restrictions relates to eligibility criteria for governmental support (TASS, 2022). The 2022 Russian-Ukrainian conflict has led to multiple free-speech restrictions on nonprofits. Nonprofits that speak against the conflict face restrictions in government support allocation, a decree initiated by the Deputy Chairman of the State Duma Committee on the Development of Civil Society and supported by the Ministry of Economic Development. These institutions act as gatekeepers to exclude nonprofits that undermine regime legitimacy from a range of NPO eligible for state support.

Apart from repression, government co-opts nonprofit efforts, thereby depoliticizing them and eliminating their protest mobilization against the authoritarian nature of the state. Some scholars claim that the regime balances the suppression of civil society by allocating funds to NPOs, thus buying their loyalty (Bederson & Semenov, 2021, p. 544). Indeed, the Russian government provides substantial financial support to nonprofits in the form of grants and contracts for social services (Fröhlich & Skokova, 2020; Krasnopolskaya et al., 2015) and creates various participation and expression mechanisms, such as the Public Chamber or advisory boards (Ljubownikow & Crotty, 2016). NPOs are highly welcomed in these consultative bodies, but actual participation is limited to technical rather than principal decisions (Pape & Skokova, 2022; Stuvøy, 2014), and the government is not obligated to follow NPO recommendations or make institutional changes. Less than 20% of nonprofits believe their expertise is taken into account by the government (Pulsngo, 2022).

The marginalization of advocacy inevitably follows co-optation processes. Pape and Skokova (2022) demonstrated the mostly apolitical character of advocacy among Russian nonprofits. Advocacy for sensitive environmental or human rights issues is not perceived as an appropriate behavior either by the government or by the majority of the nonprofit sector. NPOs admit and accept a power-imbalance role in its relationship with the state, with only about 10% of Russian nonprofits declaring that the state sees NPOs as equal partners (Pulsngo, 2022).

In the next section, we provide illustrations of how NPOs contribute to the legitimation of the current regime according to the five patterns of legitimation explained earlier.

## *4.1*  *Civil Society as a Façade of Democracy*

Civil society helps the Russian state create the appearance of a functioning democracy. Until the mid-2010s, the facade of Russian civil society was remarkably vivid: human rights organizations enjoyed some degree of freedom, and nonprofits did not face massive legal restrictions on their operations. This dynamic allowed Russia to be portrayed as conforming to a global discourse on civil society with international legitimacy. Even recently, in 2021, the Russian government gave awards to human rights NPOs to maintain the appearance of supporting democracy and providing a space for civil society.

More recently, the question of legitimacy for domestic audiences has become more relevant, and the state has put enormous efforts into building a democracy-like picture of support for civil society at home. The government has accomplished this by maintaining open procedures to register an NPO, unlike China (Heurlin, 2010); financially supporting nonprofits (Skokova et al., 2018); and creating GONGOs. GONGOs act in various areas of civic engagement, volunteering, and election observation. They aim to demonstrate civic engagement as a form of democracy to strengthen the legitimacy of the regime (Alava, 2021; Hemment, 2012). They also mobilize citizens for rallies with pro-government agendas. For instance, the All-Russia People’s Front regularly holds mass street campaigns to support various state decisions (Hellmeier & Weidmann, 2020). By promoting public activity, GONGOs crowd out independent NPOs and replace bottom-up civic engagement.

The Russian government actively promotes volunteering as the most apolitical form of civic participation to demonstrate democracy and the growth of bottom-up initiatives (Malinova, 2022). The state actively shapes organizations to promote a volunteering agenda at home and abroad. One example is the Association of Volunteer Centers (AVC), established in 2014. The largest of the volunteering GONGOs, the AVC boasts more than two million volunteers across Russia. The AVC, together with government authorities, created an infrastructure that tends to have a monopoly on volunteering. It includes volunteering centers all across the country, involves youth at schools and universities, and has a huge network of volunteers among the elderly.

State-run NPOs exemplify and substitute civic engagement as the fabric of the community and portray a façade of meaningful civic engagement with the public and unprivileged groups that are missing from the conversation.

## *4.2.*  *Making Civil Society Play by the Rules*

NPOs contribute to reaffirming the existence of the state and therefore contribute to the legitimacy of authoritarian rule. The most striking example in Russia is the way nonprofits acquiesce to the restrictions of the “foreign agents” law. For instance, after the law was enacted, only a few NPOs went to court and withdrew their foreign agent status; the majority of organizations conformed to the restrictions and discontinued operation, gave up foreign funding, or ceased to be politically active. According to the Russian Ministry of Justice 137 NPOs out of 244 conformed to the restrictions with the foreign agent status for the period of 2012–2022. NPOs generally follow the state’s adaptation and compliance strategies (Skokova et al., 2018) and by doing so reaffirm the power balance and legitimacy of the regime that established those rules.

Russian NPOs that follow the rules and fall in line with the political status quo utilize an output-maximization strategy. They assess the risks of challenging the state and give up an open confrontation to reaffirm organizational stability and secure opportunities to operate. Similarly, Tian and Chuang (2022) and Vu (2019) have noted that for nonprofits in China, compliance with state norms has become synonymous with organizational competence and capacity. This balance between the autonomy of NPOs’ to pursue a social mission and the maintenance of a depoliticized neutrality in relation to the state (Jing, 2015; Tian & Chuang, 2022) secures the established organizational networks that allow the NPOs to continue their work. Bederson and Semenov (2021) similarly concluded that the principal survival of NPOs depends on access to resources and that the state manipulates the rules of access in Russia and in authoritarian regimes generally.

## *4.3.*  *Сivil Society as a Mechanism of Limited Participation and Feedback*

Governments collaborate and consult with nonprofits on policies and legislation in relevant areas. However, this collaboration is “often just window dressing, used by the regime to legitimize its decisions” (Lorch & Bunk, 2017, p. 7), which is partially true for Russia.

There are broad formal opportunities for NPOs to be involved in government consultation and agenda setting in Russia (Pape & Skokova, 2022). The state and the president generally recognize NPOs’ expertise and call for taking it into account. Public Chambers and advisory boards are official consultative bodies for the government, aimed at providing expertise on laws, consulting, and critically evaluating government operations. The Public Chamber (est. 2005) consists of members selected by the president, representatives of regional Chambers, and representatives of NPOs (mainly GONGOs). Federal and regional authorities are obliged to work with advisory boards that include civil society representatives (Federal Law No. 212, 2014). However, their feedback is rarely taken into account, and their participation is limited to the sphere of social issues (Ljubownikow & Crotty, 2016; Stuvøy, 2014).

Despite the lack of official feedback mechanisms, there are examples of effective participation. NPOs significantly contributed to the creation of governmental orders promoting philanthropy and volunteering. Furthermore, nonprofits were consulted during the COVID-19 pandemic, proposed and led the execution of the philanthropy tax deduction for businesses (2020), developed federal standards for volunteer support, and offered input on several other initiatives (Agentstvo strategicheskikh initsiativ, 2017).

Regardless, despite some positive cases of bottom-up feedback and consultation, when NPOs provide feedback and share responsibility in the decision-making process, the overall outcome is legitimizing the state (Heurlin, 2010; Wischermann et al., 2018).

## *4.4.*  *Civil Society as a Strategy to Increase Output Legitimation*

Nondemocratic regimes rest their legitimation efforts on a reciprocal social contract in which the state maintains social guarantees in exchange for citizens’ loyalty. The overall output legitimacy is achieved through a discourse of support and the appropriation of joint work with NPOs (Toepler et al., 2020). Russian NPOs deliver social services, create partnership projects with authorities, and participate in government programs in health, social welfare, education, sports, and other areas. These initiatives are covered in the media for the benefit of the general public, and the state claims credit for the services provided. Nonprofits also create publicity out of these joint initiatives and thereby reinforce the contract between citizens and the authoritarian regime to deliver social services and maintain the regime (Brass, 2022).

The regime attracts NPOs to governmental social welfare programs and creates publicity about NPOs’ participation. For instance, NPOs have helped to implement seven out of 12 Russian national projects (Topoleva-Soldunova, 2019). The largest NPOs initiated and implemented federal projects with authorities, as is the case with the Vera Foundation. The Vera Foundation initiated the development of a palliative care system in Russia and, with the Ministry of Health, runs several large-scale projects aimed at modifying the country’s neuropsychiatric boarding school system. These projects started in 2019 after Putin’s instructions to develop and improve palliative care in the country (ONF, 2022). Another example is the federal Concept of Active Longevity, initiated by the NPO “Old Age to Joy” and run with the Ministry of Labor and Social Protection.

The government uses media to broadcast and absorb the achievements of NPOs and inform Russians about its increasing financial and infrastructural support to nonprofits. The official discourse excludes the ideas of human rights protection and is largely equated with social services, charity, and volunteering (Belokurova, 2010). For example, federal state-owned TV channels regularly highlight the role of social service NPOs showing real cases of their help to people in need. Many Russians do not distinguish what social services are provided by NPOs and what come from the state institutions. Showing the success of NPOs on TV helps to strength the image of the state as socially responsible and caring for citizens. Moreover, the role of social NPOs and volunteering is a common point in annual Presidential Addresses to the Federal Assembly widely broadcasting in the media. To maintain regime legitimation and stability, the Russian government needs NPOs to carry out social services and thus supports them in doing so, with the state taking credit for the service and the NPOs having little voice in the matter.

## *4.5.*  *Civil Society and Regime Discourse*

The fifth way NPOs strengthen the legitimacy of an authoritarian regime is by supporting and reproducing regime discourse. The Russian government actively uses the discourse of traditional values, nationalism, patriotism, and Russian Orthodoxy, as well as military strength and social welfare (Malinova, 2022). The Russian government supports organizations that support the regime’s priorities. As Frohlich and Skokova (2020, p. 698) have shown, projects that conform to state-led conservative public discourse are privileged by the Presidential Grant Foundation, the state’s major funding program.

In Russia, about 12% of all NPOs work in the areas of patriotism and historic memory (Rosstat, 2019). These include the largest GONGOs, such as Russia’s Young Army (Unarmia), which has over 200,000 members, and the Russian Union of Veterans of Afghanistan, which has about 500,000 members. The Unarmia promotes military-patriotic education in Russia that aligns with state discourse about traditional values, heroism, and masculinity (Alava, 2021).

In line with military and imperial discourse, more than 6,000 NPOs signed a letter in support of the so-called military operation in Ukraine: “We, the leaders of public organizations, civil activists, support the course of our President and call for the unification of all public forces” (Yandex, 2022). Regional NPOs, including resource centers for nonprofits, signed similar letters in their regions. For comparison, a little more than 500 NPOs signed a letter against the conflict.

# 5. Conclusion

Political context, namely the type of political regime, determines the hierarchy of societal functions that civil society performs. In a democracy, the key function of civil society is to monitor and challenge the state, and advocacy is often perceived as a main activity of NPOs, even those that deal with social welfare. This dynamic is possible because of the open nature of the political context and the ability to solve many social problems through the functioning channels of political communication. In an authoritarian context, there is no such openness, and the state controls associational life and a discourse of power to a much greater extent. We claim that the core societal function of NPOs in authoritarian settings is regime stabilization obtained by repression, co-optation, and legitimation applied by the state to civil society.

In Russia, all three pillars of regime stability are in place. The state represses claims-making NPOs that aim to challenge the state while supporting and co-opting social welfare nonprofits. The policy results in the optimal strength and structure of civil society for maintaining and securing the authoritarian regime. By using NPOs as a facade of democracy and as a feedback mechanism, by establishing GONGOs, and by appropriating nonprofits’ outcomes, the authoritarian regime enhances its legitimacy and secures stability.

Governmental funding and co-optation does not automatically make NPOs regime supporters. As objects of tight political regulation and control, NPOs are compelled to work in existing circumstances in which they must weigh the risks of political confrontation and rationally choose their social mission as a priority. They can achieve their mission only in a game of balance between autonomous work with their beneficiaries and the maintenance of a depoliticized neutrality in relation to the state. This balance is key to organizational success and survival in an authoritarian context. NPOs play the game by the regime’s rules.

Concluding that NPOs contribute to regime stability, we go further than conclusions about the undermining of political activism, the loss of autonomy, and the displacement of advocacy in nondemocratic regimes as consequences of government interactions or interventions. We go beyond the sectoral analysis and consider the interaction between the state and NPOs in a broader social system.

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