

## Organised civil society in Russia

Russian President Vladimir Putin recently described civil society organisations as 'indispensable partners of the state' in providing social services and building a modern economy. However, Russian NGOs lack public support; in addition, their independence is being steadily undermined by repressive new laws and growing state control.

### Russia lacks strong civil society traditions

As in many other ex-communist countries, public support for civil society is much weaker in Russia than in western Europe. According to 2014 [Charity Aid Foundation surveys](#), Russians are seven times less likely to become volunteers than their UK counterparts, and are also less generous with their money (over one year, [41%](#) gave to charity, compared to [64%](#) of UK respondents). Distrust of NGOs, their [perceived](#) failure to pass donations on to end beneficiaries, and lack of transparency were cited by around half of respondents as reasons for not donating money.

This widespread distrust is partly a legacy of the Soviet period during which civil society organisations, in so far as they existed at all, were [extensions](#) of the state. Suspicion continues in post-Soviet Russia, but for different reasons: numerous Russian NGOs were set up in the 1990s with help from western governments and foundations (such as George Soros's Open Society Foundations), which [invested](#) heavily in Russian civil society as part of their efforts to promote democratisation. In the absence of domestic funding, many are still reliant on foreign assistance, leading to a [perception](#) of them as an alien influence, or worse, instruments for [foreign meddling](#) in the country's affairs — sentiments confirmed by President Vladimir Putin's repeated references to foreign-financed NGOs as '[jackals](#)' and '[Judases](#)'.

Meanwhile, surveys show growing passivity and reliance on state action, another possible reason for a lack of interest in non-governmental initiatives. Asked by independent pollster [Levada Centre](#) in 2014 about the relationship between the state and citizens, 72% of Russians felt that the state should do more to look after people, compared to just 13% who felt that it was up to individuals to take care of themselves (down from 25% in 1990); at the same time, only a small minority felt they could influence decisions at local or national level (19% and 13% respectively). These developments may reflect growing state control over large sections of the [economy](#), the [media](#) and other spheres of activity.

### An increasingly repressive legislative environment

**2006 NGO Law:** The legislative clampdown on civil society began with a January 2006 [act](#) giving the authorities the right to ban NGOs considered to threaten Russian 'sovereignty, ... cultural heritage, and national interests', among other things; to bar foreign nationals from founding NGOs, and prevent foreign NGOs from implementing programmes in Russia, together with heavy fines for non-compliance. Some of these restrictions were eased by a second law in August 2009, signed by President Dmitry Medvedev.

**2012 'Foreign Agents' Law:** The November 2012 [Law on Foreign Agents](#) requires any NGO receiving foreign funding and engaging in 'political activity' to register as a 'foreign agent'; those that refuse to do so face heavy fines and prison sentences. Russian NGOs have appealed against the law to the Russian Constitutional Court, which [upheld](#) it in April 2014, and the [European Court of Human Rights](#) (ECtHR), which has yet to hear the case. In June 2014, an amendment to the law came into force, allowing the Ministry of Justice to register NGOs without their consent.

The new law has raised several concerns: NGOs that declare themselves as 'foreign agents' will find it difficult to win public trust, given that in Russian, as in English, this term carries negative connotations of Cold War espionage, and that Putin has accused such NGOs of '[serving foreign interests](#)' and 'meddling'. Moreover, the definition of 'political activity' is vague, encompassing activities to 'influence public policy' or

'form public opinion'. Not only human rights organisations, but also election monitors, women's rights organisations, environmental NGOs (although 'protection of flora and fauna' is explicitly excluded from the scope of the law), and even the highly respected [Dynasty Foundation](#) which awards research grants, are among the [69 registered foreign agents](#); the [Levada Centre](#) is among 54 further NGOs which have been warned to comply with the law.

Apart from the stigma of being branded a foreign agent, NGOs registered as such are subject to heavy reporting requirements, an unlimited number of unscheduled audits, and prior approval of all political activities; a mere three NGOs have accepted these restrictions voluntarily. NGOs wanting to avoid this can either decide to forego foreign financing (but finding domestic alternatives is often impossible, as state agencies and business are usually [reluctant](#) to fund organisations which challenge the authorities), give up political activity, or close down altogether (as least [12 NGOs](#) have already done so).

**May 2015 [Undesirable Foreign and International Organisations Law](#):** under this latest piece of legislation, foreign NGOs can be completely barred from Russia, and Russian nationals 'participating in their activities' fined or imprisoned, if they are deemed to threaten Russia's 'constitutional order, defence capacity or national security'.

The new law has yet to be invoked; a request from one member of parliament to bar several NGOs including Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International, filed just days after the new law was published, has been [rejected](#) by Russia's Office of the Prosecutor-General.

**Other legislation:** NGOs are also affected by a series of other laws of more general application adopted during President Putin's current term of office. Among other things, these introduce harsh penalties for organising or attending [unauthorised assemblies](#), [offending religious feelings](#), promoting [extremism](#) or '[non-traditional sexual relationships](#)', and committing [libel](#). The [vague wording](#) of much of this legislation creates legal uncertainty and can [easily be applied](#) to various NGO activities.

**Non-legal repression:** apart from introducing repressive legislation, the government is accused of orchestrating [attacks](#) against NGOs or not doing enough to protect them, as in the case of a recent [raid](#) on an NGO office in Grozny. Vandals [defaced](#) the Moscow headquarters of Memorial, a human rights group, with graffiti denouncing it as a foreign agent (however, on a rare positive note, the group subsequently [won](#) its legal battles both against registration as a foreign agent and closure).

### Growing government control over civil society

At the same time as excluding foreign influence over Russian civil society, the Kremlin is consolidating its own control over the sector. In 2013, it distributed around [3.5 billion roubles](#) (€60 million) in grants, including (in an apparent attempt at window-dressing) to NGOs critical of the government, such as the [Moscow Helsinki Group](#). Similarly, it has co-opted some of its most vocal critics, appointing human rights activists [Ella Pamfilova](#) and [Mikhail Fedotov](#) as Human Rights Ombudsman and Chair of the Presidential Council on Human Rights, respectively — positions from which they can continue to criticise the government without enjoying much real [influence](#).

Kremlin supporters now hold key positions in numerous [NGOs](#); Alexandr Brechalov, the president of Russia's [Civic Chamber](#) (a body representing NGOs which is consulted on draft legislation) is a Putin ally and a co-chair of the [All-Russian People's Front](#), set up to back Putin in 2013.

Several Russian NGOs, such as human rights movement '[Resistance](#)', appear to function as [GONGOs](#) (government-organised NGOs), which support the government's agenda and receive funding from it while masquerading as independent organisations — recalling the role of [opposition parties](#) and the [media](#) in Russia's '[managed democracy](#)'.

In its [resolution](#) of 10 June 2015 on the state of EU-Russia relations, the EP notes that 'legislation has recently been passed with ambiguous provisions that are used to place further restrictions on opposition and civil-society actors'; 'bearing in mind the enrichment of a society through the development of genuine and independent civil society, expresses its deep concern at the deteriorating state of human rights, including the rights of freedom of expression, association and assembly', and 'stresses the importance of continued political and financial support for independent civil society activists' among others.