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Article



Subnational Variations in Government-Nonprofit Relations: A Comparative Analysis of Regional Differences within Russia

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ABSTRACT *This article discusses the evolution of government-nonprofit relations at the regional level in Russia against the background of national-level restrictions on NGOs. Russia recently also introduced supportive policies and the article aims to trace the regional administrations' reactions to the dual realities of the federal government's posture towards nonprofits. Considerable variation was found in regional government-nonprofit relationships as well as deviation from national policy stances. Using a subnational comparative framework, this article addresses a gap in the literature and lays the groundwork for future cross-national comparisons of subnational variations of government-nonprofit relations in other authoritarian and hybrid political regimes.*

Keywords: government-nonprofit relationships; subnational comparative analysis; Russia; federalism; NGOs; authoritarianism; civil society

Introduction

As cross-national research has demonstrated, well-established relationships with the government are a core prerequisite for expanding the nonprofit sector globally (Salamon et al. 1999; Casey 2015). While our understanding of government-nonprofit

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collaborations has evolved considerably over the last three decades (Salamon and Toepler 2015), there still is a somewhat monolithic view of this partnership: comparative research tends to assume the existence of one dominant and prevailing government posture in each country that governs the essence of sector relations. Various models have been proposed to capture the nature of the relationship (e.g. Gidron et al. 1992, Young and Casey 2016), but cross-national research has not yet penetrated the subnational level to a significant degree.

In this regard, comparative nonprofit sector research mirrors the situation in research on state capacity – that is, the ability of the state to ensure effective public service delivery and regulatory enforcement, where analysts have only recently focused on comparing subnational variations cross-nationally (Enriquez et al. 2017). Unpacking the monolith and focusing on subnational variations of government-nonprofit relationships is a fruitful area for international nonprofit research. In this article, we explore how Russian regions relate to nonprofits against the background of an increasingly restrictive national policy environment for NGOs. It seeks to address the question of whether government-nonprofit relations at subnational levels are generally uniform in authoritarian or hybrid political regimes, and if not, what accounts for any variations.

The literature on Russian federalism suggests that the Kremlin started to consolidate political and economic power in the central government (the Center) from the early 2000s onward; bringing the regions into line with vertical power relations and turning Russian federalism into a “sleeping institution” (Zakharov 2010). At the same time, the Center promulgated an explicit policy posture towards nonprofits that has often been characterized as uniformly restrictive (Daucé 2014; Flikke 2016).

Considering the power relations between the Center and the periphery in Russian federalism and the nature of the federal government’s posture towards nonprofits, what are the implications for the subnational government-nonprofit relationship? Do regional administrations adopt the Center’s policy stances in their own interactions with local and regional nonprofit organizations or is there room for variation, where subnational sector relations can deviate from those of the federal government? We posit that variation continues to exist and that regional government-nonprofit relationships have been all but uniform during the Putin era since 2000. We aim to understand why these relations vary between regions against the background of a central policy approach towards nonprofits and pursue this point by applying a comparative approach at the subnational level with qualitative fieldwork in selected Russian regions. The following section will provide the conceptual framework of this study, followed by a description of the study methodology. We then present our findings about regional variations.

Conceptual Framework

To contextualize our study, we briefly discuss Russian federalism under Putin and then outline the Center’s policy agenda towards nonprofits. The 1990s left the central government politically weakened and Russia’s regions in control of crucial resources and revenue streams. Upon assuming office in 2000, Putin sought to recentralize the country, returning political and economic control to the Center. This raised questions of whether the regions retained autonomy or became implementation agents. In our case, the specific question is whether studying the central government’s policies is sufficient for

understanding government-nonprofit relations in Russia or whether a focus on the subnational level might generate different and more nuanced insights.

As a baseline for exploring regional variations in government postures towards nonprofits, we provide an overview of the Center's explicit policies. These are essentially two-pronged: there is a highly restrictive policy environment for certain types of nonprofits, especially in human rights and environmental advocacy, and a more encouraging posture towards social service-focused so-called "socially oriented nonprofit organizations" (SONPOs) (Skokova et al. 2018).

Federalism Russian-style

In federal systems, areas of shared rule at the federal level combine with areas of self-rule at the local or regional levels and political authority is dispersed to some degree to accommodate diversity while preserving a measure of unity in the system (Watts 2008). Hybrid systems that are constitutional federations, but also feature overriding federal powers, "may be described as quasi-federations" (Watts 2008, p. 11). The overriding federal powers that mark the differences between federation and quasi-federation derive from constitutional provisions curbing regional authority, allocations of tax revenues that limit local fiscal autonomy, or through political processes affecting intergovernmental decision-making and political bargaining. The latter is affected by the degree of legislative decentralization, the federal legislative representation of regions and the political party structure, with single party systems favoring more centralized power structures (Watts 2008, p. 120).

Russia is a constitutional federation that had a weak federal Center during the 1990s. Consequently, governors were able to accumulate power and secure high levels of regional autonomy during the economic turmoil of the transition (Hanson 1997; Ross 2002). This was especially the case in regions rich in natural resources. With the beginning of Putin's presidency, a gradual recentralization of Russian politics took place, exemplified by Putin's concept of a "vertical of power". The Beslan hostage crisis in 2004 marked a turning point in the relationship between Moscow and the regions (Gel'man 2015), as Putin began to stress the need to strengthen the unity of the state in order to cope with terrorism more efficiently. As a consequence, Center-periphery relations were reorganized to enhance state security and preserve regime stability. Putin created federal districts which assumed some regional responsibilities, redistributed tax revenues in favor of the Center, weakened the regional influence on the state council, and for a while replaced the election of governors with appointments from Moscow (Mitin 2008). With Putin's United Russia party accounting for the vast majority of governorships, Russia evolved into a quasi-federation, firmly controlled from the Center (Libman 2011; Sharafutdinova 2013).

Dual Realities of Government-Nonprofit Relations

While recentralizing power and reigning in the regions, Putin from the outset also aimed at restricting civil society as an independent societal power center, while at the same time supporting apolitical nonprofits that act in line with government priorities (Daucé 2015; Bogdanova et al. 2018; Flikke 2018; Skokova et al. 2018). Among the first actions were changes to the Russian Tax Code in 2000–2001 (Table 1), which deprived Russian nonprofits of most tax privileges, though foreign grants remained a tax-exempt source

Table 1. Chronology of restrictive and supportive policies towards nonprofits in Russia

Year	Nature	Legal Provision
2000/01	Restrictive	Changes of the Russian Tax Code, elimination of most tax privileges
2005	Supportive	Federal Law N32-F3 from April 4, 2005 “On the Public Chamber of the Russian Federation”
2006	Restrictive	Federal Law “On Introducing Amendments to Certain Legislative Acts of the Russian Federation” (aka NGO Law) of 2006
2006	Supportive	Introduction of Presidential Grants
2010	Supportive	Creation of socially oriented NPO status in federal law No. 40-FZ
2011	Supportive	MED grants to capacity building organizations
2011	Supportive	MED program to stimulate regional support programs for NPOs
2012	Supportive	Social Support of Citizens Decree program for NPO involvement in social services
2012	Restrictive	Federal Law No. 121-FZ “On Introducing Amendments to Selected Legal Acts of the Russian Federation Related to the Regulation of Activities of Noncommercial Organizations Performing the Functions of Foreign Agents” (Foreign Agents Act) of 2012
2013	Supportive	Federal Law No. 44 of April 5, 2013 “On the Federal Contract System in the Area of Procurement of Goods, Works and Services Required by State and Municipalities”
2015	Restrictive	Federal Law No. 129-FZ of May 23, 2015 “Undesirable Organizations Act”
2015	Supportive	Federal Law No. 442-FZ “On the Bases of Social Service for Citizens of the Russian Federation” of January 1, 2015
2016	Supportive	MED Road Map and “Set of Measures to Ensure Access of SONPOs to Government Funding of Social Services”

Source: Compiled from Benevolenski and Toepfer (2017).

of income at the time. The relationship between the federal government and nonprofits deteriorated further leading to the 2006 federal law known as the “NGO Law”, and its crackdown on external funding, which was intended to increase state control and weaken the influence of nonprofits on political development.

The NGO Law sharpened registration requirements and expanded the supervisory power of government. For the most part, it focused on foreign organizations and foreign funding of domestic organizations. Foreign funding was subsequently curtailed by allowing only government-approved foreign funders and by introducing special registration and reporting requirements for domestic organizations receiving foreign funds, leading to an overall decline of foreign support for Russian NGOs (Skokova et al. 2018).

Restrictions on foreign organizations and Russian NGOs that received foreign funding and engaged in “political activity” were further heightened with another landmark measure – the so-called Foreign Agents Act of 2012. Nonprofits subject to the law must register with the Justice Ministry and, among other restrictions, publish semiannual activity reports and indicate their status as a “foreign agent” on their documentation. The definition of “political activity” is quite broad and open to wide interpretation. The “Undesirable Organization” Law of 2015 is a third regulatory provision that allows authorities to deem foreign NGOs “undesirable” and close them down if they pose perceived threats to the constitutional order or state security.

On the other hand, the federal government has also launched a range of supportive policies (see [Table 1](#)). In 2004, Putin called for the creation of a Public Chamber, an advisory body to coordinate between the state and civil society. It was established by law in 2005, and spread as a concept at the regional level later on ([Richter 2009](#); [Stuvøy 2014](#)). A presidential grants program was instituted in 2006. Efforts to push a more active involvement of nonprofits in social welfare service delivery were significantly ramped up in 2011 with the introduction of a toolkit for supporting the SONPOs ([Benevolenski and Toepler 2017](#)), which became the growth segment of the Russian nonprofit sector.

This initial set of measures comprised various grant programs. For eligible SONPOs, two new support programs administered by the Ministry for Economic Development (MED) were created in 2011 to supplement the presidential grants. The first provides direct grants for capacity-building and technical assistance programs for SONPOs. The second program provides co-funding of regional programs to stimulate regional governments to create new funding streams. By 2014, 71 out of 85 regional governments had established their own support programs in response to federal incentives ([Shadrin 2014](#)), up from seven before the program started. Another program was put in place in 2012 to stimulate greater SONPO involvement in social service provision to increase quality and availability of services.

In addition to grants, conditions for social contracting were also improved to eliminate competitive disadvantages due to traditional preferences for state institutions. A 2013 public procurement law required governments of all levels to reserve at least 15 per cent of total contracting value for small businesses and SONPOs. The social assistance law of 2015 then fully institutionalized SONPOs as providers of government-funded services equal to any state institutions within the Russian welfare system. It effectively ended the state monopoly on core service provision that had previously kept nonprofits and commercial providers on the fringe of the social service delivery system.

To reinforce the message, the federal government approved two white papers developed by MED in 2016 outlining additional steps to be taken over the period 2016–2020 to facilitate the involvement of SONPOs in social service provision: MED’s “Roadmap” and “Set of Measures to Ensure Access of SONPOs to Government funding of Social Services”. Both documents established mandatory, measurable targets down to the regional level, such as the share of children attending nonprofit pre-schools.

In summary, the Center has very clear, though multifaceted ideas of what government-nonprofit relationships in Russia ought to be. From the early 2000s to today, the nature of the relationship is clearly adversarial vis-à-vis nonprofits perceived to be political ([Daucé 2015](#); [Flikke 2018](#); [Skokova et al. 2018](#)). From about 2011 on, there is a second stance that stipulates a supportive, collaborative relationship with socially oriented, more apolitical nonprofit organizations ([Krasnopolskaya et al. 2015](#); [Tarasenko 2018](#)). This leads us to the question of how federal policies are realized at the regional level and whether regional administrations have discretion in designing their relations with nonprofits.

Research Questions, Methodology and Data

Despite this centralization of political power, we nevertheless maintain that the regions still have some leeway in designing their own policies with regard to regional government-nonprofit relations, based on the general literature on regional governance in Russia (Starodubcev 2010; Kropp et al. 2018). This literature emphasizes the geographical characteristics of Russia as a vast territorial state which makes it difficult for the Center in Moscow to closely control political processes everywhere. Moreover, Russia's 85 regions differ extensively in their socio-economic development and in the opportunity structures for political actors at the regional level. This general proposition of regional variation is also consistent with a small body of other work, suggesting that regions maintain some autonomy in specific policy fields (Remington 2015) and employ mechanisms and opportunities to counterinfluence the Center (Sharafutdinova and Turovsky 2017).

We also posit three specific propositions that might help explain any variation. First, one of the key takeaways of the Johns Hopkins Comparative Nonprofit Sector Project's empirical work in more than 40 countries (Salamon et al. 1999) was that the size and scope of the nonprofit sector in the economically highly developed countries of the Global North by far outdistances those in the Global South. Paid and volunteer employment in nonprofits averaged about 8 per cent of the economically active population in Anglo-Saxon and Continental European countries compared to 1–3 per cent in transitioning and developing countries. Countries with the most highly developed nonprofit sectors were also those that had adopted elements of a welfare partnership involving nonprofits in public service delivery. The significant economic disparities that exist within Russia (Zubarevich 2015) should therefore help explain existing variations, with economically less developed regions having weaker nonprofit relations and more prosperous regions having stronger ones. Hence:

Proposition 1: Regional prosperity contributes to strong government-nonprofit cooperation.

We further expect that a certain level of economic development also aids in the development of professional capacity of the regional administration and its civil servants. This, in turn, facilitates openness towards reform in public service (Liebert et al. 2013) and, by extension, towards cooperation with nonprofit organizations (Salamon and Toepler 2015). The policy advocacy literature suggests that nonprofits require access points in the political system to build relationships with policymakers and bureaucrats, which do not exist in closed systems (Ljubownikow and Crotty 2016; Li et al. 2017). Therefore:

Proposition 2: Openness of the subnational political system leads to strong government-nonprofit cooperation.

Finally, Salamon's (1995) voluntary failure theory, and the third-party government concept building on it, suggests that governments have strong incentives to utilize an existing nonprofit infrastructure for the production of public services as opposed to creating a separate set of public agencies for the same purpose. Existing nonprofits

have requisite expertise, roots in the community and access to voluntary resources that allow for more effective service delivery and reduced transactions costs for the government. As building up public services has emerged as a major policy issue in Russia (Kulmala 2016; Benevolenski and Toepler 2017; Tarasenko 2018), the existence of a well-developed local nonprofit sector with the organizational capacity to deliver such services will make regional administrations more likely to seek cooperative relations. Thus:

Proposition 3: Strong regional nonprofit sectors correlate with strong government-nonprofit relations.

The two divergent policy postures towards nonprofits – restrictive and supportive – provided two windows to chart whether the regions closely followed the Center’s postures in arranging their own relations with nonprofits, or whether regional diversity gave rise to different local approaches. Accordingly, we looked first at what support programs, if any, the selected regions had in place during the first decade of the 2000s, when the Putin administration started to crack down significantly on nonprofits; and secondly, at whether, and if so how, the regions differed in adopting more supportive stances towards social nonprofits after 2011.

This article derives from a three-year cooperative research project between US, German and Russian researchers conducted by the International Laboratory for Nonprofit Sector Studies at the National Research University Higher School of Economics, Moscow. The project sought to assess the above-mentioned MED grant program to foster nonprofit support by regional authorities, through extensive fieldwork in eight selected regions. The fieldwork took place between June and September 2015.

In selecting regions, we took a systematic approach to reflect Russia’s regional diversity in socio-economic and political development. The selection was based on two criteria: the level of regional economic development, on the one hand, and the relative openness of the subnational political regime in combination with regional nonprofit sector development on the other. For the first variable, we used official gross regional product (GRP) per capita data provided by the Russian Statistical Agency. To capture the relative openness of the subnational political regime, we adopted the 2012 democracy ranking produced by the Moscow Carnegie Center (Petrov and Titkov 2013), which assessed democracy in Russia’s regions based on expert opinion. For indicators of regional nonprofit sector development we used the HSE Civil Society Monitoring data (<https://www.hse.ru/monitoring/mcs/>).

Based on these criteria, we selected eight regions: Perm and Irkutsk (strong economic development and regime openness); Tomsk and Belgorod (strong economic development, weak regime openness); Vladimir and Novosibirsk (weak economic development, strong regime openness); and Ryazan and Tambov (weak economic development and regime openness). We collected data on government-nonprofit relations through document reviews and in-depth interviews. Overall, 142 interviews were conducted, including 106 with nonprofit representatives, 18 with government officials and 18 with nonprofit experts (see Appendix). Krasnopol'skaya et al. (2015) provide additional background on case selection and project methodology.

Findings: Regional Variations of Government-Nonprofit Relations in Russia's Regions

Based on our empirical material, we identified four pathways of government-nonprofit relations in Russia's regions: (1) evolving government-nonprofit partnerships in Perm and Novosibirsk, (2) endangered government-nonprofit cooperation in Tomsk and Irkutsk, (3) paternalistic patterns of government-nonprofit cooperation in Belgorod, and (4) weakly developed government-nonprofit cooperation in Tambov, Ryazan and Vladimir.

Evolving Relations

Perm and Novosibirsk are two regions where government-nonprofit relations have continued to evolve positively. In both regions, a relatively strong nonprofit sector has developed since the 1990s. In Perm, about 4,000 nonprofits are officially registered, with 20–30 per cent of them being operational (Perm, government representative, June 2015). In Novosibirsk, of 4,500 officially registered nonprofits, about 1,000 are operational, out of which about 200 are actively collaborating with the regional authorities (Novosibirsk, government representative, June 2015). Although the overall numbers of active nonprofits in Perm and Novosibirsk seems small, both regions are among the strongest in terms of regional nonprofit development.

The city of Perm has a long history of supporting nonprofits and citizen initiatives. The municipal administration started providing grants as early as 1996. This was followed by a regional grants program in 2001; additionally, there were specific grant programs for youth organizations, cultural initiatives and so forth. Perm was also one of the first regions that opened access for nonprofits to contracting with government agencies. Accordingly, the history of the nonprofit sector has been long and rich and Perm has become known as “the capital of Russian civil society” (Perm, local expert, June 2015). Local experts explain the prominent position of the regional nonprofit sector with the fact that human rights organizations developed here in the 1990s, establishing a local infrastructure which over time enabled a sector-wide development (Perm, nonprofit representatives, June 2015). One indication of that is the existence of a successful resource center. The Grani Center is a regional foundation that was established in 2007 by the Civil Chamber of the Perm Region, the Society for Entrepreneurial Initiatives and a number of nonprofit experts from Perm and Moscow. The center provides consultation and informational support to citizens and civic initiatives for the realization of public interests and facilitates interactions between the local nonprofit sector and the regional authorities. Among other support services, Grani also operates an inter-regional resource center, dedicated to the development of SONPOs in Perm and elsewhere (Center Grani n.d.).

Novosibirsk is similar to Perm. The city of Novosibirsk established a grant competition in 2000, the regional government followed in 2003 and put significant funding into it. The initiative was backed by the governor, who acknowledged the importance of civic initiative and participation (Novosibirsk, nonprofit representative, June 2015). Another similarity to Perm is that Novosibirsk also features an important resource center, the Siberian Center for the Support of Public Initiatives (<http://scisc.ru/>), established in 1995. Its mission is “to facilitate the development of public initiatives and civic responsibility

with the aim of solving public problem on the basis of civil society institutions”. Just like Grani Center in Perm, the Siberian Center is an inter-regional foundation, serving local initiatives, but also reaching out to other regions. The Siberian Center provides infra-structural support to nonprofits, civil society development, information and analytical services, evaluation support and the facilitation of government-nonprofit interactions.

The inception of the MED program in 2011 further intensified government-nonprofit cooperation in both Perm and Novosibirsk. Both regions substantially increased their own funding commitments and the MED program thus strengthened the cooperation between the regional administrations and the nonprofit sector and facilitated its development. Overall, both regions are characterized by relative strong cooperation. The regional and local administrations are keen on working with nonprofits, especially in the field of social welfare, as they acknowledge their expertise, knowledge and skills in dealing with social issues. Because of this political openness, civil servants are supportive of collaboration with societal actors. Nonprofit representatives in Perm and Novosibirsk described the relationship as positive: “Our cooperation [with the state] is very productive. Our voices are heard, we can do a lot as non-profit organizations. Our expert opinion is taken into account by decision-makers” (Perm, nonprofit representative, June 2015).

The existence of regional umbrella organizations and nonprofit resource centers proved to be an important factor for the positive development. Nonprofit leaders emphasized the fact that these support centers have strengthened nonprofits at the local and regional level (Perm, NPO representative, June 2015). The model of government-nonprofit cooperation in Perm and Novosibirsk can therefore be described as evolving partnerships.

Endangered Relations

In marked contrast, two other regions, Irkutsk and Tomsk, displayed deteriorating government-nonprofit relations, more in line with the prevailing national narrative of growing restrictiveness. Irkutsk features a fairly well-developed nonprofit sector. Regional experts place the number of operational organizations at about one-third of the 3,500 officially registered nonprofits (Irkutsk, nonprofit representatives, June 2015).

Irkutsk created one of the earliest support programs in 2001, which at the time was “the most comprehensive one in Russia with regard to civic participation in responding to social problems”. The support program was jointly designed by the regional administration, the Public Chamber and the nonprofit sector (Irkutsk, expert, June 2015). However, in the years following the start of the grant program, cooperation between government agencies and nonprofit organization lost momentum and became less intense. A nonprofit representative, who was actively involved in the creation of the program, noted that

in 2000, when we started our cooperation, we were meeting often, debated how we could organize our work better and jointly developed the regulations for our work. Over time, however, this process has been slowing down. The responsible government officials were exchanged. As a result, the administration does not any longer take our proposals into account. It has become a very formal way of participation now. (Irkutsk, nonprofit representative, June 2015)

The number of annual awards also dropped after 2004.

Due to the tightening of nonprofit regulations, regional nonprofits have become very cautious in their activities (Irkutsk, nonprofit representative, June 2015). Traditionally, Irkutsk was a hub for environmental activity due to the close vicinity of Lake Baikal, a major natural resource, to the regional capital. But the strong presence of environmental organizations within the local sector contributed to the deterioration of government relations. These organizations have particularly felt the effects of restrictive national policies, which the regional government supported. Environmental activities in the region have often been in opposition to the priorities of the local political elite, as one nonprofit representative explained: “Ecology is a difficult sphere of activity. There is always a conflict between the state, the local population and the business community. It is hard to find financial support for our activities, and foreign funding is nearly banned” (Irkutsk, nonprofit representative, June 2015).

Although the regional grant program was pathbreaking and deemed widely successful, it remained small. The region barely raised its own funding share when joining the MED program, but changed its program procedures according to MED guidelines. Regional experts considered the original program to be superior and nonprofit representatives were especially critical about the introduction of new criteria. One representative, for example, noted that “the criteria of the grant program have become very bureaucratic. The evaluation is very complicated and focuses merely on quantitative criteria without taking into account the quality of the project” (Irkutsk, nonprofit representative, June 2015).

In Tomsk, there are around 5,000 registered nonprofits and, according to a local umbrella organization, between 300 and 400 active SONPOs (Tomsk, nonprofit representative, June 2015). Tomsk had no regional program before, but a municipal grant program for nonprofits has existed in the capital city since 2001, reflecting originally positive relations between the government and nonprofits during the 1990s. Similar to Irkutsk, however, the originally fairly promising government-nonprofit relationship deteriorated in the course of the 2000s. The regional government adopted the MED program in 2011, but with no real commitment to working with nonprofits. As one nonprofit leader (Tomsk, June 2015) noted: “From 2010 onwards, it has become more difficult for nonprofits to operate in our region”. This has particularly been so because the “foreign agent” law strongly impacted local nonprofits. While, as of mid-2015, no organization in Tomsk had been included in the “foreign agents” registry, the law nevertheless affected the behavior of organizations as nonprofit leaders feared the prospect of facing financial liability for potential violations and consequently abstained from seeking any foreign funding. This was in striking contrast to previous years, when Tomsk NGOs had been very active in internationally funded programs (Tomsk, nonprofit representative, June 2015).

As a result, according to local experts, independent-minded nonprofits in Tomsk have effectively been forced out of existence, because they became too critical and encountered difficulties with the regional authorities as the overall political climate in the Tomsk region grew tense after 2006. A local nonprofit, for instance, was harassed by the security services, until its director decided to close the organization down and emigrate (Tomsk, nonprofit representative, June 2015). Since the end of the 2000s, many of the “older” nonprofits that had been established in the 1990s have disappeared. Human rights and

environmental nonprofits have been particularly affected by this trend. As of 2015, no human rights groups were left in the region, after the last organization closed due to harassment from state agencies (Tomsk, nonprofit representative, June 2015).

In both regions, the development of government-nonprofit relations over the past 15 years has been ambivalent. Although relatively strong nonprofits had emerged in the 1990s, not many of them survived and were able to transform into professional organizations. Many of the human rights and environmental nonprofits that were created in the 1990s were either forced out of existence or lost much of their viability. The SONPOs that emerged in both regions over the past five years remain weak in their professional development and social service capacity, as the administrations in Irkutsk and Tomsk are more hesitant in their approach towards the nonprofit sector. Most of these newer organizations are self-help nonprofits that are barely able to survive. Although the regional administrations support cooperation with nonprofits on paper, they have fallen short on developing strong collaborative ties with the regional nonprofit sector.

It is characteristic for both Tomsk and Irkutsk that the position of the nonprofit has considerably weakened since the early 2000s. Many of the old, “traditional” nonprofits, which were founded in the post-Soviet transformation period, were forced to close down their activities, because they became too critical and encountered difficulties with the regional authorities (Tomsk, nonprofit expert, June 2015) or lost international support (Irkutsk, nonprofit representative, July 2015). In both regions, originally relatively strong nonprofit sectors have come under growing pressure. Nonprofit representatives described the development of the regional nonprofit sectors as ambivalent. New SONPOs have emerged but they lack professional capacity. Umbrella organizations and regional resource centers are less prominent than in Perm or Novosibirsk, which limited the impact of the support programs. As of 2015, neither Tomsk nor Irkutsk had developed mechanisms for the participation of SONPOs in social service contracting (Tomsk, nonprofit representative, June 2015). Overall, the interactions between the regional administrations and nonprofits reflect endangered relations.

Paternalistic Relations

In Belgorod, there is another variation, where the patterns of government-nonprofit cooperation can be described as paternalistic but not necessarily antagonistic. The subnational political system is centralized, restrictive and lacks pluralism. The power is concentrated in the hands of the governor, who has been ruling the region continuously since 1993. Under these conditions, Belgorod never developed much of a nonprofit sector. According to a local expert,

one can count about 30 to 35 nonprofits that are effectively working in the region. The number of those nonprofits that are relevant in size, work on a regular basis, have sustainable funding and conduct projects is even smaller. These are about 20 nonprofits. (Belgorod, expert, September 2015)

The regional nonprofit sector in Belgorod has undergone many changes over the past two decades: “NPOs that had been established in the 1990s, are today existing on paper only; in

the 2000s, these organizations were replaced by new and more active organizations.” In addition, Soviet-style legacy organizations still exist and accumulate a lot of financial and non-financial resources (Belgorod, nonprofit representative, September 2015).

Before 2011, the regional administration in Belgorod directly supported the local branch of the Russian Red Cross as well as a number of women’s, disability, veterans’ and pensioners’ organizations. Nonprofits depend on the goodwill of civil servants, and access to the governor or to other high-ranking decision makers is paramount. As one nonprofit representative said: “Our [rehabilitation] center was built by the generosity of the Governor” (Belgorod, nonprofit representative, September 2015). The patterns of interactions are clientelistic, where nonprofits find themselves in a dependency relationship with the political elite.

The type of support confirms this pattern. Before 2011, the regional administration provided funding for selected nonprofits on a non-competitive, incidental basis. Belgorod joined the MED program in 2011, and since then the support for nonprofits has become more balanced and is now provided in a competitive grant program based on the guidelines, designed by the MED. Since the introduction of the co-financed grant support program, the regional government has made efforts to shape a more self-reliant, market-oriented and sustainable nonprofit sector in Belgorod. Regional experts, however, believe that participation in the program was primarily an effort to improve relations with Moscow (Belgorod, nonprofit expert, September 2015). Overall, the development of the nonprofit sector in the region has been relatively positive. The regional authorities are now paying more attention to nonprofits than they used to do in the past. Despite all the obstacles in the region, nonprofit representatives agree that it has become easier to work than 20 years ago. In general, nonprofits are more active, and their financial situation has improved. However, the regional nonprofit sector still remains weak in term of its influence on policy formation. According to one expert, nonprofits “have gained more resources and power compared to 20 years ago, yet they cannot substantially change the social, political and economic situation [in the region]” (Belgorod, nonprofit representative, September 2015). Overall, the clientelistic patterns of government-nonprofit cooperation continue to prevail, and the regional nonprofit sector remains underdeveloped. Nevertheless, the introduction of the MED program has brought positive change, and local nonprofits now have a broader support base available and see government relations improving. Yet, even while noting the positive developments, local nonprofit representatives emphasized the dependency relationship with the administration. The modes of interaction are therefore best described as paternalistic relations.

Weak Relations

In the final three regions, government-nonprofit relations and nonprofit sector development have remained weak. Tambov used social contracting from 2006 to 2011 as the main form of support for the regional nonprofit sector (Tambov, administration representative, July 2015). This was converted into grants to conform with the MED program in 2011. In Ryazan and Vladimir, the regional administration did not provide any systematic support to nonprofits before 2011 beyond non-competitive, incidental funding for women’s, veteran’s and disability nonprofits. Both regions were slow in adopting the

MED program too, remaining largely uncommitted. Characteristic for all three regions is the assessment of an independent expert in Vladimir:

In my opinion, the problem is that the Vladimir Region lacks a comprehensive approach to collaborating with NPOs. Our region does not have a mechanism that allows [the government] to see civil society as a whole. There are different people in different regional departments who deal with NPOs, but nobody sees the broader picture. [...] The representatives in the municipalities lack a basic understanding of civic organizations. (Vladimir, expert, June 2015)

A nonprofit leader in Tambov similarly held that “NPOs and the administration do not understand each other; the [regional] government is working on one set of tasks, while NPOs are working on completely different [things]” (Nonprofit representative, Tambov, July 2015). Sector representatives also perceive a lack of trust from regional government agencies (Tambov, nonprofit representative, July 2015), which limits interaction between the two sectors. Overall, the modes of interaction in this last group of regions can be called weak relations.

Discussion

Table 2 summarizes the regions’ nonprofit support initiatives pre- and post-2011. As shown, three regions had fully fledged support programs operating in the early 2000s, at the same time that the federal government was launching repressive measures and created a generally unfavorable operating environment for nonprofits. The other five regions had more limited engagements with nonprofits. Tomsk only had a municipal program in the capital, but no regional government support; Tambov made no grants, but experimented with contracting; and the remaining three regions provided no more than non-competitive support to known nonprofits with established ties to the regional administrations.

Table 2. Overview of regional experiences with government-nonprofit cooperation

Region	Regional programs (prior to 2011)	Municipal programs (in the regional capital)	Social contracting with NPOs (prior to 2011)	Participation in MED program since
Perm	Yes (since 2001)	Yes (since 1996)	Yes (since 2008)	2011 (adapted existing program)
Novosibirsk	Yes (since 2003)	Yes (since 2000)	No	2011 (adapted existing program)
Irkutsk	Yes (since 2001)	Yes (since 2005)	No	2011 (adapted existing program)
Tomsk	No	Yes (since 2001)	No	2011 (adapted existing program)
Belgorod	No	No	No	2011 (new program)
Tambov	No	No	Yes (2006–2011)	2011 (new program)
Vladimir	No	No	No	2013 (new program)
Ryazan	No	No	No	2014 (new program)

The deterioration of the national climate for nonprofits appears not to have affected the regions in the same way. Some regions, such as Perm and Novosibirsk, proved to be resilient due to the existence of a strong regional nonprofit sector, while others, such as Tomsk and Irkutsk, were much more exposed to national pressures. In Irkutsk, environmental nonprofits were susceptible to the repressive measures of the Center and no protective sector infrastructure existed. In the regions with limited support schemes, any pressure on nonprofits by the Center was less acute for the regional administrations, because support either focused on local initiatives or was limited to nonprofits that were known entities for the regional administrations. The lack of regional funding support, however, made places like Tomsk even more inhospitable to human rights and other nonprofits that got cut off from foreign support with few local revenue streams to fall back on.

The regional responses to the MED program and the incentives it provided also showed some variation, as shown in [Table 2](#). The three regions with pre-existing grant programs adapted their programs to meet the MED guidelines. For Perm and Novosibirsk, the MED program was an opportunity to further strengthen and expand their prior support levels. Irkutsk's already dwindling commitments, in contrast, barely met the federal resources and the region did little to protect the remaining features and advantages of its own original program.

Three regions created new programs fairly quickly in response to the MED funding invitation. In Tomsk and Tambov, however, it was an effort to comply with the Center's direction, but it remained a formal effort without a real commitment by the regional administrations. Tambov phased contract-based support out as it started to participate in the MED program. Despite the new programs, there was no significant improvement for nonprofits in these regions. Belgorod, by contrast, shows a different picture: the creation of the new program helped to rejuvenate the local nonprofit scene and government-nonprofit relations, although the progress is from a very small base and the long-term prospects uncertain. The final two regions, Ryazan and Vladimir, continued to exhibit a lack of commitment and understanding of the role of nonprofits, similar to Tambov, but these two regions were among the last to avail themselves of the resources and incentives of the MED program, showing an even deeper reluctance to engage. [Table 3](#) provides a summary comparison of the four modes of government-nonprofit relations in Russia's regions.

Conclusion

We find that despite political consolidation and centralization, regions still have, and take, considerable freedoms in approaching the relationships with their local nonprofits in Russia. While this broadly supports our core proposition, we also suggested three more specific propositions to help explain any variation. Specifically, we posited that government-nonprofit relations depend on the level of regional economic development, the openness of the subnational political system and the strength of the regional nonprofit sector.

We do not find the proposition that regional prosperity is a predictor of strong government-nonprofit cooperation to be supported in our empirical research. Economically disadvantaged regions, such as Ryazan and Tambov, have indeed less developed government-nonprofit cooperation, but the pattern does not hold across our cases. Although Novosibirsk is not a prosperous region, it nevertheless developed and

Table 3. Government-nonprofit relations in Russia’s regions

Type of partnership	Evolving partnerships	Endangered cooperation	Paternalistic patterns of cooperation	Weakly developed cooperation
Characteristics	Strong cooperation based on partnership Administration interested in cooperation Economic development facilitates non-profit development Strong non-profit sector and prominent resource centres	Limited cooperation Situation for nonprofits deteriorated Human-rights and environmental NGOs closed-down or marginalized Role of NPOs in social services remains limited Less prominent resource centres	Paternalistic mode of cooperation Dependency relationship between the regional government and nonprofits	Weak non-profit sector Lack of trust between regional government and nonprofits Limited cooperation
Examples	Perm, Novosibirsk	Tomsk, Irkutsk	Belgorod	Tambov, Ryazan, Vladimir

maintained strong government-nonprofit relations. Tomsk and Belgorod, in contrast, are among the prosperous regions, but have not developed strong cooperative relations. Economic prosperity accordingly does not seem to have a strong, direct impact on the development of government-nonprofit cooperation.

We also aimed to explore whether openness of the subnational political system might contribute to strong government-nonprofit relations. This proposition is somewhat supported empirically. Regions with open political systems, such as Perm and Novosibirsk, have developed solid government-nonprofit cooperation. Belgorod as a region with a closed political system features paternalistic government-nonprofit relations, though these have been developing. Nevertheless, it remains difficult in regions such as Tomsk and Irkutsk to fully assess the openness of the subnational political system, in part due to shifting regional politics since the 2012 Carnegie democracy ranking.

Finally, our third proposition that the strength of the regional nonprofit sector correlates with strong government-nonprofit relations seems to be supported by our data. Regions with a more strongly developed nonprofit sector (Perm, Novosibirsk) have developed stronger government-nonprofit relations. Regions with a weaker nonprofit sector (Belgorod, Ryazan, Tambov, Vladimir) have developed weaker government-nonprofit cooperation. Of particular importance here is the existence of regional umbrella or support organizations, such as the Center Grani in Perm and the Siberian Center for the Support of Public Initiatives in Novosibirsk. Such sector infrastructure institutions have been shown to play important roles in both Western and developing country contexts (Brown and Kalegaonkar 2002; Appe 2016). These umbrella organizations assist civic initiatives in the region and represent the sector. They can be influential in developing good relations between regional

government agencies and nonprofits. Moreover, they also help build the organizational capacity of nonprofits, thereby preparing them managerially for working with the government. Without such supportive infrastructure, the nonprofit sector in Irkutsk was not able to sustain positive government relations in the face of national-level restrictive pressures on nonprofits.

In sum, our comparison has unearthed divergent dynamics and significant variations in regional governments' commitment to collaborating with nonprofits in Russia as well as relationships between them. Our findings suggest that Russia's regions have options and opportunities to steer their own path vis-à-vis the federal government's policy directives. A December 2018 MED ranking of regional support for nonprofits (see <http://nko.economy.gov.ru/portalnews/read/4606>) is broadly consistent with our findings about the regional differences: Perm and Novosibirsk rank towards the top (5th and 18th respectively), whereas Tambov (26th), Ryazan (27th), Vladimir (49th) and Irkutsk (54th) rank considerably lower. Independent of a given region's position, the ranking reflects the MED's recognition of regional disparities and the need to motivate regional administrations to keep strengthening their interactions with nonprofits.

With regard to nonprofit policy, our study suggests a much greater variability of regional interactions with the sector than what the literature focusing solely on repression of democratization-oriented and advocacy NGOs would typically suggest. Much of this literature, as exemplified by Daucé's (2014) or Flikke's (2016, 2018)), focuses on narratives of national restrictions, leaving the subnational out of consideration. This may have significant implications for future research on civil society in other hybrid and authoritarian regimes. Focusing on subnational variation may provide a more nuanced understanding of the complexities of nonprofit–government interaction at the local level, where local administrators may be more concerned about ensuring service delivery than protecting the political power bases of the regime. As such, our research suggests the importance of focusing on subnational contexts in trying to understand and chart nonprofit sector development.

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Appendix: Interviews

Belgorod: 19 Interviews, Belgorod City, 9/7-14, 2015.

- #1-3: Government representatives
- #4-17: NPO representatives
- #18-19: Local experts

Irkutsk: 17 Interviews, Irkutsk City, 6/23-7/1, 2015.

- #1-2: Government representatives
- #3-14: NPO representatives
- #15-17: Local experts

Novosibirsk: 18 Interviews, Novosibirsk City, 6/5-10, 2015.

- #1-2: Government representatives
- #3-16: NPO representatives
- #17-18: Local experts

Perm: 17 Interviews, Perm City, 6/17-24, 2015.

- #1-2: Government representatives

- #3-15: NPO representatives
- #16-17: Local experts

Ryazan: 16 Interviews, Ryazan City, 6/1-11, 2015.

- #1-2: Government representatives
- #3-14: NPO representatives
- #15-16: Local experts

Tambov: 17 Interviews, Tambov City, 7/27-8/4, 2015

- #1-2: Government representatives
- #3-15: NPO representatives
- #16-17: Local experts

Tomsk: 20 Interviews, Tomsk City, 6/10-19, 2015.

- #1-3: Government representatives
- #4-18: NPO representatives
- #19-20: Local experts

Vladimir: 18 Interviews, Vladimir City, 6/7-16, 2015.

- #1-2: Government representatives
- #3-15: NPO representatives
- #16-18: Local experts