

RUSSIA'S POLICY SHIFTS TOWARDS THE EU: TRENDS IN THE OPERATING EU CIVIL ADVOCACY GROUPS IN RUSSIA

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INTRODUCTION

The essay tries to understand how civil advocacy groups started to operate in Russia (after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991) and traces out the differences that existed in policy making towards these groups by Gorbachev, Yeltsin and presently the Putin regime (Holloway, 1989; Henderson, 2011 p.8; Human Rights Watch, 2018). In the same context, the essay highlights Gorbachev's "new thinking" (Holloway, 1989) policy that opened up the door for 'Western' civil advocacy groups to operate in Russia, the Western policy of keeping Yeltsin in power being advocated by these Western civil advocacy groups which made them gain an inconsistent reputation amongst the Russian people and finally the present day domestic conditions and challenges laid out by Putin for these civil advocacy groups to function in the name of "foreign agents".

The next part of the essay talks about the previous democracy efforts of the EU, the types of influences for promotion that the EU tried to exert and the intended and the unintended effects of the imposed sanctions of the EU on Russia based on human rights violations in Ukraine since 2014 (European Council, 2014; Hansson *et.al*, 2014). The essay shows that along with the already existing lack of credibility of any 'Western' civil advocacy groups since the Yeltsin years, the label of "foreign agents" on such organizations by the Putin regime is only being legitimized. It has therefore kept more than 80% of the Russian audience satisfied with Putin's handling of affairs with the United States and the EU (Simmons *et.al*, 2015). Also, after the intervention in Ukraine, more than 80% of the Russians praise Putin for this very Ukrainian 'intervention' in spite of these sanctions (Simmons *et.al*, 2015). Hence not only the intent of what the EU sanctions are trying to achieve is questionable but it further makes the political, social and economic climate for any 'Western' along with its European civil advocacy groups uncomfortable to operate in.

The essay argues that in order to make the atmosphere viable for any such 'Western' civil advocacy group to function, the climate of their damaged reputation (since the 1993 elections) in Russia first needs to be set right. In the same context, the essay talks about bridging communication gaps with the Russian audience (Spencer, 2011-2012 p.182) at the grass root level through the exchange of ideas in various fields of research and education. Also, in developing a 'Russian outlook' to enable closer ties with the Russian people, the essay highlights the need to localize advocacy activities and consider alternate sources of funding (Kreienkamp, 2017 p.10), in order to reduce chances of being recognized as a "foreign agent." More so, the essay suggests that any Western civil advocacy group should understand the conservative social fabric of Russia, analyse whether the Russian society is

ready for a change that is radical and considered ‘Western’ in nature (Duffala, 2014) and therefore be less ambitious towards designing attainable goals of civil advocacy that pushes the Russians towards a democratic transition.

A HISTORICAL BACKDROP OF RUSSIA PROMOTING ITS CIVIL SOCIETY THROUGH THE WEST

After the end of the Cold War, Russia was viewed by the West to be “the most important test case” (Evans, 2005 p.41) for the transition of democracy by “helping the Russian people to build a free society and common market” (Marsden, 2005 p. 47). While Gorbachev¹ spoke about the promotion of universal and human values and the cooperation² with West in the promotion of these values through his policy of “new thinking” (Holloway, 1989), this rapidly opened up the door for Western contact with the grass-root levels of the Russian society. Therefore in the late period of Gorbachev’s rule, pro-democratic non-governmental organizations funded by George Soros and the MacArthur Foundation (Sundstrom, 2006 p.34.) had already started operating in the Soviet Union to monitor human rights violations and local elections, support the independence of the media and establish political parties (Mendelson, 2001 pp.72-73).

With the resignation of Gorbachev and the collapse of the Soviet Union, the phase of liberalization³ that Gorbachev had turned towards seemed to move towards a proper democratic⁴ transition in Russia. With Yeltsin coming to power (Lally and Englund, 2011), the leverage of Western pro-democratic organizations to operate in Russia increased as Yeltsin remained more liberal than Gorbachev and wanted to make Russia “a normal European country” to gain acceptance by the West and integrate Russia into the Western system of values and norms (Saari, 2009 p.735).

During the Yeltsin era, it was Yeltsin’s ignorance of the Russian civil society that provided an atmosphere conducive for the functioning of NGOS, democratic promoters, international and intergovernmental organizations and other civil advocacy groups rather than his own enthusiasm to undertake a democratic transition (Henderson, 2011 p.8). Also, several of these organizations received funding from the West (Saari, 2009 p. 736). However, the local hindrances that these groups faced were to reform the neglected Russian society and uplift the passive political spirit of the Russians that they had developed as a result of decades of a culture of severe repression (Howard, 2003 pp. 17–18).

¹ Austin (2013 pp. 2-22) maintains that the Gorbachev regime was a single-party system i.e. bureaucratically efficient in nature and effectively used violence to repress any source of rising threats. However if there was a serious rise in opposition, it would mean that the party is on its transition of collapsing. Geddes (1999 p. 131) maintains that single party systems are the most important sources of authoritarian stability and as they are more peaceful in nature due to the lack of decision making constraints. The case of Gorbachev is primarily important as his progressive policies towards liberalization and reformation had caused a split in the Communist Party of Soviet Union. The split was between those who wished to reverse his policies and those who wanted to take the country towards market reform through a multi-party system (Steele, 2011). The split weakened the leadership of the Communist Party from inside and hence proved incapable to keep the Soviet Union from collapsing in 1991.

² Cooperation meant attaching human values and interests to peace and the need to develop a system of interdependence between the economic and political ideas of capitalism and socialism (Holloway, 1988). This interdependence also entailed “cooperation in defense of universal values” rather than “conflict between capitalism and socialism” (Holloway, 1988).

³ Gorbachev called for “the liberalization of the authoritarian political structure, proposed a major reform of the centralized economy, and finally demanded the transfer of power away from party bodies, including the Central Committee and its Politburo” (Young, 1992 p.47).

⁴ A stable and functioning democracy is built upon free and fair elections, a strong civil society, significant political and civil rights and an open and accountable government (Beetham and Boyle, 1995 as cited by Baloi, 2003 p.63).

The first problems began to arise when Yeltsin drew up a new constitution (Schmemmann, 1993) to rig the 1993 elections in his favour. Even though several transnational NGOs and various activists in Russia protested against the outcome (Colton, 1998 pp. 21-26), the West along with many European institutions supported Yeltsin staying in power in the hope of Russia becoming democratic under a sustained Yeltsin leadership (Hough, 1998 pp. 701-706). Things went further downhill with the start of the first Chechen War in 1994 where Yeltsin carried out gross human rights violations (Forsberg and Herd, 2005 pp. 455-478). More importantly, to keep Yeltsin in power in the hope of Russia democratizing, the United States sanctioned 10.2 billion U.S. dollars as electoral aid in Yeltsin's name during the 1996 elections ("10.2 Billion Loan To Russia Approved", 1996). While the functioning intergovernmental organizations tried balancing criticism and exhibiting goodwill towards the government, the NGOs and the Russian population demanded a strong action of condemnation from the Yeltsin administration (Human Rights Watch, 2005).

Each of these events particularly stands out as an important instance for analysing the problematic functioning of the European Union in the case of Russia. Even though several NGOs and Russian activists were against the gross election fraud⁵ in 1996 (McFaul, 1997), the actions of the functioning international institutions were mixed (Council of Europe, 2000). For example: International election monitoring reports from the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, Council of Europe and the European Union paid 'little attention' to the discrepancies and supported the results (Council of Europe, 2000). Such an approach taken by the European Union along with its organizations remained particularly problematic as in the name of supporting 'democratic institutions', it ended up supporting an election result that emerged out of undemocratic means. Therefore, Shapovalova and Youngs (2013) specifically point out that after the Russian backlash, "low public trust in NGOs and low citizen engagement in associational life still blight democratic quality in post-Soviet countries."

With Putin⁶ coming to power, it was no surprise that in the name of strong governance⁷ at home and a stronger influence abroad, he promised to resurrect the Soviet style⁸ of

⁵ "In the spring of 1996, Yeltsin and his campaign manager, billionaire privatizer Anatoly Chubais, recruited a team of financial and media oligarchs to bankroll the Yeltsin campaign and guarantee favorable media coverage on national television and in leading newspapers...the Yeltsin campaign conducted extensive "black operations," including disrupting opposition rallies and press conferences, spreading disinformation among Yeltsin supporters, and denying media access to the opposition. The dirty tricks included such tactics as announcing false dates for opposition rallies and press conferences, disseminating alarming campaign materials that they deceitfully attributed to the Zyuganov campaign, and cancelling hotel reservations for Zyuganov and his volunteers. Finally, widespread bribery, voter fraud, intimidation, and ballot stuffing assured Yeltsin's victory in the runoff election" (Melkonian, 2017).

⁶ Krastev (2011 p.8) maintains that the Putin regime is a new type of competitive authoritarian regime (i.e. "vegetarian" in nature) where the regime is "moderately repressive". The reasons stated being that even though political repression is rampant and journalists are persecuted, Russians can travel freely across the world, surf the Web with lesser constraints than in Iran or China and is "an open economy with open borders" unlike the Soviet Union (p.8). The main challenges that such a regime poses to democratization include the arrest and intolerance of political opposition, censorship of art and media, stretching the definition of what treason means by putting laws on organizations promoting the civil society and threatening the pursuers of human rights in the country (Jannuzi, n.d.).

⁷ "He prepped in the KGB; he likes hands-on control, shady deals, and mafia-style loyalty; he hates the idea of anything like a "color revolution" in Russia; and he is hostile to the West and the rule of law. For the first time in Russian history, representatives of the security services, professionally trained to employ coercion, are not just working for the Kremlin—they are running the Kremlin. Russia has had a despotic state throughout its history, but until now it has not had a "triad regime," in which one group has taken control of political power, vast stores of wealth, and the repressive mechanisms of the state" (Shevtsova, 2015 p.23).

⁸ Todd (2002, p.6) talks about six factors that characterize a Soviet state: state-owned and hence centralized, privileged elite who control the entry into intellectual (technical and administrative) professions, censorship of cultural and artistic life, use of repression and secret police as a method of coercion, weak political institutions as all aspects of life have been

governance and restore its former glory (Walker, 2018). Putin has in fact learnt from the failures of his predecessors: Gorbachev (who in the wake of becoming more liberalized had split the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and hence proved ineffective to tackle the Soviet breakup) and Yeltsin (who in the want of making Russia a ‘European style’ country had allowed Western and Russian civil advocacy groups to weaken the consensus based on repression that the Russian administration had been exercising on its citizens). Therefore by classifying organizations (operating with any foreign funds, associations with the West of any kind and promoting ‘Western’ values such as government accountability, same-sex marriages⁹ etc.) which promote human rights, LGBT issues, environmental concerns, political activism, social concerns and health benefits as “foreign agents”, (Human Rights Watch, 2018) Putin tries to promote an ‘indigenous Russian society’ rather than a ‘Western styled Russian society moving towards Western democracy’. The label of a “foreign agent” that essentially translates into a ‘traitor’ or ‘spy’, especially while undertaking “political activity” that covers “all aspects of advocacy and human rights work” (Human Rights Watch, 2018) has enabled Putin to enhance the deep rooted scepticism (since the 1993 elections) in the minds of the Russian citizens. More so, these citizens had looked upon the West for support during the times of Yeltsin and had faced disappointment instead. The Putin regime therefore makes the social, economic and political climate of the country highly unfavourable for any such groups to operate in the name of ‘civil advocacy.’

EU: DEMOCRACY PROMOTION AND THE EFFECTS OF ITS IMPOSING SANCTIONS:

The European Union enlists “respect for human dignity and human rights, freedom, democracy, equality and the rule of law” as its fundamental values (European Parliament, n.d.). It is therefore not surprising that the European Union had tried to *promote* these fundamental values in Russia through its institutions (Examples: European Initiative for Democracy and Human Rights, Council of Europe and Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe). *Promotion* here implies an *active* and *intentional* support (Tansey, 2016 p.3) to encourage Yeltsin staying in power at the domestic level, hoping that he continues to push Russia towards a democracy. The nature of promotion refers to:

“Diffusion”¹⁰ through information and communication technologies (where the European institutions tried to spread the fundamental European values into the Russian society through grass-root level contact)

“Multi-lateral conditionality”¹¹(where the European Union tried to suspend Russia from signing the Interim Agreement on Trade (European Commission, 1996) and the Council of Europe held back Russia’s application of membership (Council of Europe, 1995) due to its disastrous records of human rights violation during the Yeltsin era.)

politicised by a dictator who ‘represents the interests of the country’, conservative ideology that even though seems to cater to the early revolutionary ideals but actually replaces them in practise.

⁹ Putin believes same-sex marriages as a “genderless” and “infertile” values of the West that stand against Russian values and hence he stated in a 2013 conference, “They are denying moral principles and all traditional identities: national, cultural, religious, and even sexual ... They are implementing policies that equate large families with same-sex partnerships, belief in God with the belief in Satan” (Foer, 2017).

¹⁰ Way and Levitsky (2010) talks about the distinct ways in which international influence has perpetrated into authoritarian regimes in the post-cold war era (pp. 38- 40)

¹¹ Ibid.

“Democratic assistance”¹²(foundations funded by George Soros and the MacArthur Foundation had already collaborated with local activists in Russia “to establish political parties and carry out elections, support independent media and protect human rights” (Sundstrom, 2006 p.34 as cited in Saari, 2009 p.736) and started functioning in the late Gorbachev era)

“Transnational advocacy networks”¹³ (held Yeltsin accountable by bringing the rigging of the 1993 and the 1996 elections and the atrocities of the first Chechen War into international focus)

Also, since EU sponsorship of democracy through civil society groups ideologically differed from the Soviet style of governance i.e. to bring about democracy in Russia rather than persisting with the existent rule, it gradually led in a trickle-down, *unintended*¹⁴ effect of Putin labelling such groups as “foreign agents” and the Russian population developing scepticism against such groups. Such problems with the European Union trying to push for regime change with unintended consequences are not new. An example is that of Uzbekistan: a former Soviet State (sharing a common history¹⁵) before the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. The European Union has maintained sanctions over Uzbekistan¹⁶to force a way through to gradual democratization as the country maintains a severe crackdown on the functioning of international human rights groups, non-governmental organizations, journalists, and members in support of political opposition (Human Rights Watch, 2007). When the Uzbek officials agreed for a “human rights dialogue” and welcomed EU officials for discussions, the EU eased sanctions on Uzbekistan thinking that the country is in its way to democratization. What this led to was the unintended effect of the immediate arrest of Umida Niazova and Gulbahor Tureva (human rights defenders), taking the count of arbitrarily imprisoned defenders to 15 (Human Rights Watch, 2007).

The point on sanctions needs further elucidation as the European Union has imposed targeted sanctions on Russia since 2014 (European Council, 2014) after Russia’s “illegal annexation” and “destabilization of Ukraine” (Council of the European Union, n.d.). Even though there are diplomatic¹⁷ components in the sanction, the economic¹⁸ sector of Russia seems to have

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ See Tansey (2016 p.34): Figure 2.1 (Typology of International Influences on Autocracy), in ‘The International Politics of Authoritarian Rule’

¹⁵ Ideological, economic, political, social and cultural

¹⁶ Way and Levitsky (2007 p.56) has shown that authoritarian rule in Uzbekistan is maintained with the country having less Western linkages i.e. “density of a country’s economic, political, organizational, social, and communication ties to the European Union and the United States” (p. 48). Way and Levitsky (2007) also maintain that countries having low Western linkages tend to persist longer when forced to democratize (p. 48). Peksen (2009 p.61) suggests that “if sanctions fail to undermine the coercive capacity of the target elites and lead to more economic and political disorder, the government will likely employ more repression.” This case remains true in the case of Uzbekistan as the initial sanctions failed to hold the country and its leadership accountable to Uzbekistan’s disastrous records of human rights violations. Also, with an inconsistent policy of the EU to suddenly ease sanctions on the basis of Uzbekistan agreeing on a “human rights dialogue”, this not only showed the lack of determination on the side of the EU but also encouraged the Uzbek leadership to further consolidate its rule using tools of repression.

¹⁷ 57 Russian officials face travel restrictions and asset freeze as they have been deemed “responsible for actions undermining or threatening the sovereignty of the Ukraine” (Hansson *et.al*, 2014).

¹⁸ Targeted economic sanctions refer to “restrictions on the export or sale of certain technologies suited to the oil industry for use in deep water oil exploration and production, Arctic oil exploration and production, or shale oil projects in Russia” and “a further prohibition on providing services, including drilling, well testing, logging and completion services, and the supply of specialized floating vessels for projects in Russia” (Hansson *et.al*, 2014). Military and economic sanctions include the imposition of a limit in transactions with “certain named entities operating in the Russian financial and defense industries”, restrictions on the export or sale of certain types of dual-use technologies and goods in Russia that have a

primarily been targeted (European Council, 2014). As a result, there has been a recent decline of EU exports to Russia, impacting the job market of both the EU and Russia and also the decline of EU investments in the Russian energy sector (Fritz *et.al*, 2017 pp. 38-41). The sanctions therefore necessarily filter down to agency as unemployment in any sector would directly affect the Russian society. More importantly, unemployment mixed with dissatisfaction does little to improve EU’s credibility as a democracy promoter in the already sceptical minds of the Russians and directly creates operational problems for the international civil advocacy groups. The reason being that it legitimizes Putin’s label of “foreign agents” against these groups for acting as hindrance to promote the Soviet dream of “restoring Russia’s former glory and consolidate Russian’s status once again as a power to be reckoned with” (Gutfeld, 2008 p.85). Also, it disables the Russians to pledge loyalty and allegiance to their homeland (“Russia’s Strength in Loyalty to Traditions of National Unity, Freedom – Putin”, 2016).

Therefore, when Peksen and Drury (2010, p.240) argue economic hardship as a resultant of economic sanctions is used as opportunity by the targeted regime for consolidation of rule, weakening oppositions and creating “new incentives for the political leadership to restrict political liberties, to undermine the challenge of sanctions as an external threat to their authority”, Russia seems to stand out as a classic case study after its Ukrainian intervention and EU imposed sanctions.

Hence after the 2012¹⁹law of “foreign agents” was introduced, the law was revised and amended in 2014²⁰(after the EU sanctions) in an attempt to further curb political liberty, weaken advocacy of political opposition and hence consolidate the Putin regime from the threat of Western values and governance structure. More so, Putin has indeed consolidated his rule with the concept of ‘rallying around the flag’ as 83% of Russians praise Putin for his actions against Ukraine and 82% Russians remain satisfied with EU-Russia relations (Simmons *et.al*, 2015).

Also, putting EU sanctions based on the factor of “multi-conditionality” of promotion and influence seems to have no effect to push Russia towards democracy, especially after the end of the Yeltsin presidency. More importantly, civil liberty seems to have further deteriorated in the year 2017. Therefore the intent of what the EU sanctions aim to achieve is highly unclear. The following is a table that defines what political rights and civil liberties encapsulate. The next table is a compilation that score the political rights and civil liberties of Russia from 2015-2017(after the EU sanctions imposed in 2014).

Parameter	Refers to
Political rights	Electoral Process, Political pluralism and participation, accountability of the

military usage or facilitate a military-end user, restrictions on providing advice and any assistance under the Common military list (Hansson *et.al*, 2014).

¹⁹ In 2012, Bill No. 102766-6 was introduced in the Russian Parliament that called for “the regulation of the activities of non-profit organizations performing the functions of a foreign agent” (Duma: Automated legislative support system, n.d.).

²⁰ In 2014, an amendment was made in to the law with the term “foreign agents” that authorised the Ministry of Justice to register groups as “foreign agents” without giving them any notice if the organization carried out “political activity” against the interest of the state and received foreign funding (Human Rights Watch, 2018)

	government
Civil liberties	Freedom of expression and belief, associational and organizational rights, rule of law, individual rights

Table 1.0: Compiled from the Freedom House (Freedom in the World: Russia)

YEAR	PARAMETER	SCORE	PARAMETER	SCORE
2015	Political rights	6	Civil liberties	6
2016	Political rights	6	Civil liberties	6
2017	Political rights	6	Civil liberties	7

Table 1.1: Compiled from the Freedom House (Freedom in the World: Russia) (1=most free, 7=least free)

EU: OVERCOMING CHALLENGES TO PROMOTE DEMOCRACY AND ITS IMPLEMENTATION IN RUSSIA

i) Goals:

After the 1996 elections and Putin’s label of ‘foreign agents’, it seems natural that the Russian population would treat any international civil advocacy groups as ‘western influence’ and would remain apprehensive of their functioning at the local level. Therefore, the first thing that these groups promoted by the EU need to strategize upon, are trust building mechanisms at the grass-root level to overcome the wedge of isolation that Putin drives between the Russians and that of the West, by preventing any ‘Western’ transnational civil advocacy group to function.

The next strategy that the EU and its institutions should focus on is undertaking these activities and yet remaining out of the Putin eye²¹ in the risk of being labelled as a ‘foreign agent’. The main hurdle faced by any transnational group is the need to first register itself as

²¹ “To enforce the law, the Russian government first increased fines for failing to register as a foreign agent by 150 and then by 300 times the original amount, meaning fines can now reach up to a maximum of \$142,000 (NGO). Such a large sum can force a non-profit to close. In addition, the law gives the government “supervisory power,” or the ability for members of the Russian government involved with NGO legislation to oversee NGO operations, which clearly interferes with the normal day-to-day operations of NGOs (NGO)”(Duffala, 2014).

a ‘foreign agent’ if it receives funding from any foreign source (Duffala, 2014). Kreienkamp (2017 p.10) states in the same regard that what the civil advocacy groups should aim for is to become representatives for the people they claim to be standing for and heavy foreign funding may even establish weak links with the local population due to the issue of trust and hence alternative models of funding should be thought about.

More so, undertaking any issue of advocacy and its implementation should be implemented with caution and understanding of the older and conservative Soviet fabrics in the Russian society. Any aims or objectives undertaken by the EU and its institutions should therefore avoid splitting up the Russian society but rather make them evolve around a common unified consensus. Duffala (2014) therefore states “Successful NGOs’ goals are directed toward aiding Russian society in ways that the majority of Russians accept, avoiding “western values” such as LGBT rights.....NGOs in Russia act more like service providers than builders of international civil society.”

It is necessary to elucidate that unlike the Gorbachev and the Yeltsin era, any framework of advocacy undertaken by the EU and its institutions should have been given time to gradually settle in and the need to implement certain mechanisms to recognize and understand as to when such a strategy becomes compatible with the Russian society. An example of such an occurrence was when the EU accepted both the 1993 and the 1996 election results (Schmemmann, 1993; Forsberg and Herd, 2005 pp. 455-478) (in spite of popular protest, dismissing the Russians as not yet being able to handle such a political vacuum in the country), rather than recognizing that the Russian population could have politically learnt about self-governance from the 1993 elections itself.

The European Union also needs to openly acknowledge that during the Yeltsin and the Gorbachev era, democracy promotion was rushed, its institutions failed to stand for political and social accountability to the Russian population during the 1993 and 1996 elections and the First Chechen War in 1994. Its institutions largely ignored the needs of the Russian citizens. The aim of such declarations should not only be to restore the faith of the Russian population that they have been losing in these institutions since the 1993 elections but also make the political and social climate suitable for EU civil advocacy institutions to function.

Since Russia mainly exports crude oil and natural gas to Europe (U.S. Energy Information Administration, 2007), and its economy is highly dependent on these exports, European companies

such as Repsol that engage in such production (Foy, 2017) can play a significant role in aiming to open up civil space with the help of the European Union. However exerting pressure on a government like Putin’s may give rise to a stronger effect of ‘rallying around the flag’ as Putin could easily highlight that such European endeavours have not only put sanctions that have given rise to unemployment but is now forcing the government to act ‘European’ in nature that threatens ‘Russian’ identity. Therefore the focus would evolve around indirectly lobbying from the outside rather than directly pressurizing the government to dole out ‘reforms’ for its people.

ii) Policies to attain such goals:

In the context of the large divide that exists between the societies of the ‘West’ and ‘Russia’, Spencer (2011-2012 p.181) particularly point out that even though Russians freely travelled across the world, dialogue with the West has essentially been missing. Organizations and

institutions supported by the EU could particularly be useful to transmit ideas of cooperation and friendship amongst the Russian society. For example: organizing video conferences, say, between three nursery-level teachers of a school in Krasnoyarsk and three in Berlin. Or between coin collectors, musicians, archaeologists, sociologists in Vladivostok and Paris. Spencer (2011-2012 p.182) hence states “A sustained dialogue on almost any topic eventually shows how the participants' political cultures differ. Inevitably, they begin comparing their beliefs and ways of handling issues. Cultures change through precisely such encounters.”

Such a role can essentially be fostered by the EU along with all institutions in Russia by sending a European delegation in Russian schools, universities and various other research centres. Also, universities in the European Union can organize exchanges, offer scholarships and fee relaxations to the Russians. This would enable the Russian students to build bridges of dialogue with people back at home and bring back ‘Western ideas’ (method of ‘diffusion through information’) into the Russian society, enabling a culture of ‘free thought’ and hence a push towards democracy. This would also mean taking the power of opinion building away from the rich Russian elites (Spencer, 2011-2012 p.182), hence allowing space for ‘democratic ideas’ to stay afloat in society.

Even though Putin’s ‘foreign agent’ law is vaguely defined in terms of activities undertaken and funding (Human Rights Watch, 2018), one way to immediately avoid first eye scrutiny is adapting to a regional name while operating inside the Russian society. This automatically helps the Russian people to connect to advocacy activities and hence sense a feeling of belongingness to participate in such undertakings fostered by EU institutions. Also, in the context of increasing the likeness of escaping the ‘foreign agent’ label, “experimenting with crowdfunding, providing paid services, reaching out to corporate or high net worth individual sponsors, seeking in-kind contributions, or shifting to a membership model” (Rekosh, 2017 as cited in Kreienkamp 2017, p.10) can indeed be a policy tool to be experimented with. Another way of implementing the strategy of an alternative funding model by EU civil advocacy groups could be the creation of a small business of Russian manufactured products and selling the same products at a minimum profit to the Russian population. Not only does this help to raise funds and cut down on foreign funding, but encourages a strong bond with the Russian audience, spread the notion of being amongst the locals and develop a ‘Russian’ outlook in nature.

More so, in order to act like ‘service providers’, the EU along with its civil advocacy institutions should try distancing itself from being ‘Western’ and cater to local needs and demands. McMahon (2002 p. 51) mentions that the European Union had previously catered civil advocacy to Hungary, a former Soviet occupied state by matching local demands and wants. The way the EU supported the Hungarian women’s movement was by first recognizing the need for change amongst the locals, distancing itself from Western bias and values (that the women liberation movement is Western in nature) and funding local projects which goes on to show that “the European Union’s attitude toward women’s issues is an excellent example of the difference that international actors can make” (McMahon, 2002 p. 51). Hence, even if a civil advocacy group tries to promote ‘a western issue’ such as LGBT rights, it needs to first convince the Russian people that the issue of LGBT is non-western in nature and also use minimum foreign funding to promote such a cause, to cut off ‘Western’ bias as much as possible.

Therefore a way to recognize when the Russian society is ready for such shifts is by the local implementation of organizing and monitoring opinion polls, informal talk sessions, discussion groups and interview questions with the Russian population periodically. This not only creates a space for dialogue and exchange of ideas but also makes the Russian population understand the importance of speaking their minds out without any hesitation i.e. 'free speech', a key ingredient for the creation of a 'democratic' mind-set.

Policy tools for the European Union and its civil advocacy groups in Russia should also be less ambitious and more participatory in nature that tries to open up civil space. The implementation of this should be used in careful framing of words of what these groups are trying to achieve to negate the risk of being termed a 'foreign agent' on political grounds. An example is that of an NGO, 'German-Russian Exchange' based in St. Petersburg, funded by the EU and Russia (German-Russian Exchange, n.d.). The organization "promotes the strengthening of peace, friendship and harmony among the peoples of Germany, Russia and other countries and develops an active civil position of the individual through exchange programs and support for youth initiatives" (German-Russian Exchange, n.d.). Another participatory aim that is undertaken is by the CSF or the 'EU-Russia Civil Society Forum' in Russia (consisting of 66 members from the European Union) which provides "for a platform for members in articulating common positions, providing support and solidarity, and exerting civil influence on governmental and intergovernmental relations. These objectives are undertaken by "bringing together CSF members for joint projects, research and advocacy; by conducting public discussions and dialogues with decision-makers, and by facilitating people-to-people exchanges" (EU-Russia Civil Society Forum, n.d.)

Taubina (2017) therefore opines that due to state repression, many civil advocacy groups have closed their programmes considered against the 'national interest' and have continued to work in spheres of 'politically less challenging', for example setting up charity and social services. Even though such work is not essentially being 'democratic' in nature or promoting 'human rights', it enables the civil advocacy group to push for change even if progress remains little.

However, in the context of policy making in acknowledgement of its wrong doings in 1993, 1994 and 1996, the event of EU asking the US to reconsider putting economic sanctions on Russia (Brunsden and Weaver, 2017) in July 2017 particularly stand out. Even though the real thought being that the sanctions would directly affect the European companies and the European energy market, this particular issue could have been picked by the EU institutions advocating for the gaining of trust from the Russian audience. Targeted and informal advertisements undertaken by these groups towards the Russian society would not only enable to spread the message of the EU wanting to prevent further unemployment amongst the Russian youth but also drive the point forward of looking beyond the events of the 1990s. This would foster a favourable atmosphere of gaining legitimacy and recognition by these advocacy groups from the Russian population and also the Russian government. More so, such advertisements after July 2017 could have essentially been undertaken without hurting the US sentiments as Jean Claude Juncker (President of the European Commission) had gone on record to protect EU interests over the idea of sanctions and had remarked, "America First cannot mean that Europe's interests come last" (Huggler and Litvinova, 2017).

In the economic sector, as Repsol has a joint venture with the Russian oil company, Gazprom Neft (Foy, 2017), the EU can not only use such an opportunity to channelize funding into its civil advocacy groups but also use such European companies to gain political leverage. Civil

society actors should therefore be on the lookout for such unlikely allies. In the same context using company officials to maintain friendly relations with the Russian oligarchy²² and liaising with its European civil advocacy counterparts to promote the civil society can be an effective policy tool for lobbying. Such a step makes it difficult for the Putin regime²³ to cut off funding for these companies as it would mean putting restrictions on a huge oil enterprise like Repsol and risking immense economic losses against the Russian oligarchic interests which are part of the United Party of Russia. Gandhi and Reuter (2010 p. 83) hence maintain “the likelihood of defections from hegemonic parties increases as income declines” which could essentially leave the United Party of Russia weakened with the exit of the elites and also affect Putin’s promise of restoring Russia to its former Soviet glory.

CONCLUSION:

While giving a brief historical background of the shifts in policy making by Gorbachev, Yeltsin and Putin for any transnational civil advocacy groups to operate (Holloway, 1989; Henderson, 2011 p.8; Human Rights Watch, 2018), the essay specifically looks into the European Union as a democracy promoter and the system of values (European Parliament, n.d.) that it has tried to promote in Russia after the end of the Cold War. In the same regard, Lyudmilla Alexeyeva (a Russian human rights activist) had remarked, “We will be a democratic country but we cannot do it so quickly. We cannot! Be more patient!... In 15 years, I believe we will reach democracy” (Spencer, 2011-2012 p.173) amidst the previously rushed democracy promotion activities of the West. The essay also underlines with the help of the available literature as to what democracy promotion means, the intended and the unintended effects of such promotion (Tansey, 2016 pp. 3-34; Way and Levitsky, 2010 pp. 38-40) that the EU and its institutions have had on the Russian population while trying to push Russia towards a democracy.

Even though the essay tries to demonstrate the failure of the European Union and its civil advocacy groups as a democracy promoter underlying several factors such as Putin’s culture of severe repression, which includes the law that arbitrarily labels groups functioning as ‘foreign agents’ (Human Rights Watch, 2018), it harps on the point that the EU and its institutions can still be a success story in promoting the Russian civil society. In the same regard, it brings up the example of the Hungarian women’s movement where the EU unlike in the case of Russia, had catered to local needs and demands and projected itself to be a promoter of local values rather than of Western ideologies (Duffala, 2014).

The essay then goes on to suggest ways in which this ‘reputation problem’ of the EU and its institutions can be fixed in Russia. In terms of strategy and implementation the essay identifies: i) there is an urgent need of building bridges of communication between the

²² “By the end of 2001, it was estimated that 85% of the value of Russia’s 64 largest privately owned companies, with aggregate sales of \$109bn in 2000, was controlled by just eight shareholder groups” (Tompson, 2004 p.2).

²³ In Russia, the dominance of the political party of United Russia has been facilitated by heavy investments from Putin (Reuter and Remington, 2009 p.502). Reuter and Gandhi (2010 p.87) suggest that “hegemonic party regimes are those authoritarian regimes in which one party controls access to most important political offices, shares powers over policy and patronage, and uses privileged access to state resources or extra-constitutional measures to dominate multi-party elections.” The literature also suggests that in a span of six years, the party of United Russia started consisting of “Russia’s governors, Duma deputies, regional legislators and other political elites...The party now controls a supermajority in the Duma, a majority in almost all regional assemblies, and 78 of 83 regional chief executive posts. Overall, the party is increasingly being used as a channel for elite recruitment, a forum for distributing rents and a tool for managing elite conflict” (Reuter, 2010 p.294).

Russians and the West in terms of exchanges, free flow of thoughts and ideas and fostering dialogue and discussion amongst both the societies (Spencer, 2011-2012 p.182) ii) adapting a local name to escape government scrutiny in the first instance iii) the need to develop more local and alternate sources of funding to develop trust amongst the population (Kreienkamp, 2017 p.10) iv) understanding and promoting local issues and goals cut-off from ‘Western thought’ (Duffala, 2014) and v) targeted advertisements that help in the process of image building.

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