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**Civic Participation in a Hybrid Regime:  
Limited Pluralism in Policy-Making and Delivery in Contemporary Russia**

Catherine Owen, Shaanxi Normal University, Xi'an, China,  
Eleanor Bindman, Queen Mary University, London, UK

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This article explores the effects that post-Soviet public sector reform has had on civic participation in the policy process in contemporary Russia. Drawing on 50 interviews with individuals and citizens' groups involved in either public consultative bodies (PCBs) or socially oriented NGOs (SO NGOs), the article demonstrates that policy-making and delivery in contemporary Russia are characterised by a desire on the one hand to harness the knowledge and abilities of citizens and civic groups in place of state departments perceived to be bureaucratic and inefficient, and to control and curtail this participation on the other. We argue that these countervailing tendencies can be conceptualised as limited pluralism, a category elaborated by the seminal scholar of authoritarian regimes, Juan Linz.

Keywords: Russia, New Public Management, civic participation, public sector reform, authoritarianism

## Introduction

Since the end of the Cold War, formerly state controlled economies across the post-Soviet space have become accessible to global markets. It is widely perceived that there is now ‘no alternative’ to the existing global financial order as the former communist countries have become embedded to different extents within global fiscal and governance networks (Fukuyama, 1989; Beck, 1999; Sakwa, 1999; Heathershaw and Cooley, 2016). Principles of public sector reform that seek to create markets in areas previously controlled by the state, such as utilities, education and public health, are endorsed by international organisations and attached as loan conditionalities by international financial institutions. Yet there is a great deal of regional, national and local variety in the forms these reforms take and the contentions that arise as they are implemented across the world. Global norms of public sector reform that include privatisation, decentralisation and the outsourcing of government functions interact with domestic legislation and constitutions, as well as political cultures and traditions, to produce hybrid versions and modifications of these norms (see Robertson, 1995; Swyngedouw, 2004; Ong 2006).

This essay explores the way in which the contemporary Russian government has implemented one key norm of public sector reform: increased involvement of non-state actors in public policy-making and delivery. We address two questions: first, we consider why the Russian government has created new avenues for public participation in policy processes and, second, we assess the extent to which these avenues introduce pluralism into policy-making and delivery. We argue that the Kremlin has created participatory mechanisms in order to develop a form of governance that allows the government to downsize what it perceives as its burgeoning Soviet-era bureaucracy while maintaining control of the public sphere. However, this has been only partially successful. As with all institutional reforms, unintended consequences have emerged from these changes to the rules of the game: the new participatory institutions allow non-state actors a certain amount of influence in the policy process and, in some cases, can shape the overall direction of reforms.

Contemporary Russia constitutes a particularly interesting site in which to explore this norm, since the scholarly consensus is that Russia’s political system is a hybrid regime; that is, it possesses institutions that resemble the form of democratic pluralism but are ultimately subordinate to arbitrary state power (Shevtsova, 2001; Brown, 2001; Diamond, 2002; McMann, 2006; March, 2009; Colton and Hale, 2009; Petrov, Lipman and Hale, 2010; Robertson, 2010; Way, 2010; Treisman, 2011; Petrov, Lipman and Hale, 2014). This body of work demonstrates how Russia’s hybrid regime avoids the outright repression associated with authoritarianism *tout court*, but rather engages in forms of manipulation – of elections, the judicial system, opposition groups and parties, and the media. The case of Russia is important for understanding the implications of the advancement of public sector reform around the world as it exemplifies the way in which a non-liberal state can re-appropriate, or ‘manipulate’, internationally promoted principles for attempts at domestic regime consolidation.

We have conducted 50 interviews with current and former members of two new types of institution created by the Kremlin that aim to increase the involvement of citizens and non-profit organisations in policy-making and delivery. Regarding policy-making, public consultative bodies (*obshchestvennye konsul'tativnye struktury*, hereafter PCBs) allow certain citizens to advise local officials on draft laws; regarding policy delivery, ‘socially oriented’ NGOs are becoming increasingly active in public service provision. In recent years, electoral reforms have eroded formal avenues of participation, such as elections, as these ‘apolitical’ participatory channels have widened. These channels must therefore be seen not only as a

means for local authorities to harness citizens' expertise in the development and provision of services, but also as an attempt to create new participatory mechanisms that do not challenge the prevailing political regime.

How can we conceptualise this new participatory architecture of the Russian state? Neither liberal-democratic nor Marxist in orientation, we argue that instead this architecture most closely corresponds to what Juan Linz and Alfred Stepan have termed 'organic statism' (see Linz, 2000; Stepan, 2001). According to this model, the state is interventionist and strong, individualism and elections are downplayed, and the state is seen as 'playing a relatively autonomous, architectural role in the polity' (Stepan, 2001: 62). However, organic statism also 'accords an important role for the decentralised political participation of semi-autonomous functional groups' (ibid.: 68). Linz writes, 'we find that a variety of social groups and institutions defined by the state are created and allowed to participate to one or another degree' (Linz, 2000: 176). Organic statist regimes thus seek to create forums that allow social pluralism to exist, but also enable elites to manage and control this pluralism. Citizens can participate in some areas of public life, but not in those dominated by the elite, typically where major decision-making takes place. According to Linz, leaders may choose this arrangement due to a simultaneous rejection of both liberal-democratic and Marxist-inspired governmental frameworks, while also needing to provide formal avenues for interest representation (Linz, 2000: 208). However, such structures can become just another element of the domestic political hierarchy as elites are rarely accountable to them. Despite this, they represent a limit to the 'monistic ambitions' of the political elite who may otherwise attempt to install a more totalitarian system (Linz, 2000: 213).

Linz and Stepan characterised the kind of participation enabled by these structures as *limited pluralism*. They argue that this is the most important factor in understanding the various types of authoritarian regime (Linz and Stepan, 1996: 38) since it allows one to assess 'which institutions and groups are allowed to participate and in what way and which ones are excluded' (Linz, 2000: 175). Linz and Stepan were writing in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century and initially elaborated their model for classic non-state actors, such as the church and the military (see Stepan, 1978). They could not have foreseen the ways in which state bureaucracies would fragment and diversify, or the kinds of non-state groups that would engage in governance towards the turn of the millennium. In our view, the concept of limited pluralism remains pertinent today because, although the non-state groups may differ from those elaborated in the original model, the state still provides avenues for some to participate and excludes others, the fundamental core of their model.

Using the concept of limited pluralism to view Russia's evolving relationship between the government and non-state groups, we argue, shifts the focus away from the long-standing Western focus on the extent to which a 'civil society' is developing in the post-Soviet context (Howard, 2003; Uhlin, 2006; Javeline and Lindemann-Komarova, 2010). Likewise, it distances itself from the normative and Eurocentric implications of theories of civil society more broadly (see, for example, Cohen and Arato, 1992; Seligman, 1992; Kaldor, 2003). Instead, it allows us to focus on the role of the state in Russia's social sphere, and highlight the ways in which changes in state architecture beget new relationships between government and citizens. The goal of this article is therefore not to assess how far the organic statist model fits the overall social-political-economic nexus in post-Soviet Russia; rather, it is to propose a vocabulary that might help to conceptualise the changes taking place in Russia's reforming public sector and the impact these changes have on civic participation.

### **Civic Participation in the Policy Process: A Principle of New Public Management**

Since the 1980s, Western governments have been transforming state bureaucracies according to a cluster of principles that have come to be known as New Public Management (NPM) (Koliba, Meek and Zia, 2010: 17). These principles include decentralisation of budget responsibility to local governments, privatisation of state assets and services, outsourcing, competition among state agencies for government funding, and the reconfiguration of the citizen as a 'consumer' of public services (Hood, 1995; Ferlie et al. 1996: 6-9; Peck, 2010: 9; Plant, 2010; Denters and Rose, 2005: 261; Geddes, 2005; Clarke et al., 2007; Flynn, 2007: 204; Massey and Pyper, 2005: 105). In the West, NPM was utilised to steer the state bureaucracy away from the so-called progressive public administration (PPA) of the mid-20th Century, characterised by a statist, bureaucratic method of welfare delivery (and whose most extreme form was the Soviet welfare state) (Hood, 1995; Osbourne, 2010: 4). Although NPM is considered a broadly global trend, it has been noted that different countries 'have different starting points, are at different stages of reform and face different internal and external constraints' (Christensen and Lægheid, 2007: 9). This means that the application of the principles of NPM in diverse political-cultural settings can produce new structural frameworks and new practices, as we will see below.

The increased involvement by non-state actors in the policy process resulting from NPM implies a fundamental reconceptualisation of the relationship between citizens and government (Denters and Rose, 2005; Geddes, 2005; Pierre and Guy Peters, 2000: 4). This has two implications for the design of participatory institutions. Regarding policy-delivery, NPM assumes that government is neither best able nor best equipped to provide certain welfare services; instead, citizens' groups are seen as more flexible, efficient and cognizant of beneficiaries' needs. Consequently, government services are outsourced to third sector providers. Regarding policy-making, since the government is no longer the primary source of expertise in service delivery, the inclusion of citizens and non-state service providers in the policy-making process has become necessary in order to fill the inevitable knowledge gap. Pierre and Guy Peters have argued that, 'if they are to be successful in governing, democracies will have to devise means of accommodating more continuous forms of participation, while still being able to supply the needed direction to society' (Pierre and Guy Peters, 2000: 4; see also Swyngedouw, 2005; Vibert, 2007; Keane, 2009). As we discuss below, this prescription applies to non-democracies as well.

In the case of Russia, some have argued that participation by non-state actors in Putin's Russia constitutes little more than 'window dressing' for the regime (Markus, 2007); others claim that it is a result of low state capacity (Hedberg 2016). However, our research suggests that there exists a genuine desire on the part of the state to increase levels of citizens' input. Indeed, there is a growing body of work that demonstrates the influence of NPM on public sector reform in general (Verheijen and Dobrolyubova, 2007; Cook, 2007, 2013; Wengle and Rasell, 2008; Romanov, 2008) and increased civic participation in the policy process in particular (Hemment 2009; Tarasenko, 2015; Bindman, 2015; Myhre and Berg-Nordlie, 2016; Aasland, Berg-Nordlie and Bogdanova, 2016; Bogdanova and Bindman, 2016). These studies also show, however, that this is not a simple transferral (or 'diffusion') to Russia of 'global' (or Western) norms and standards (on diffusion, see Finnemore and Sikkink, 1998; Risse, Ropp and Sikkink, 1999); rather, as elsewhere, Russian lawmakers reshape these norms to suit the context of its hybrid authoritarian regime.

Civic participation in non-democracies remains under-researched, since studies of authoritarianism tend to focus on power structures at the national and elite levels, (Brownlee,

2007; Schlumberger, 2007; Brooker, 2009; Svolik, 2009; Gandhi, 2010; Pepinski, 2015). However, civic participation, as opposed to ‘mobilization’ (see Yurchak, 2006), is present in many non-democratic states, in some cases, existing alongside mobilizational activities. Forms of participation prevailed in the post-Stalinist USSR, such as interest groups (Skilling and Griffiths, 1973), local soviets (Friedgut, 1979; Hahn, 1988), and monitoring bodies (Adams, 1978; Owen, 2016), which were framed as part of the ‘withering away of the state’ under communism. In contemporary China, scholars have highlighted the incremental policy change effected by domestic NGOs, media and individual activists who still work within the framework of the party-state (Mertha, 2009; Zhu, 2008; Jiang, 2010; He and Warren, 2011; Duckett and Wang, 2013). Likewise, Jayasuriya and Rodan’s 2007 study of Southeast Asian political regimes focuses on varying ‘modes of participation’, defined as ‘the institutional structures and ideologies that shape the inclusion and exclusion of individuals and groups in the political process’ that a particular regime enables. They state, ‘rather than dismissing some modes of participation as mere artefacts of dysfunctional democratic institutions, we seek instead to explain the underlying political dynamics behind such participation’ (Jayasuriya and Rodan, 2007). In line with this, we propose the use of ‘limited pluralism’ as a framework for comparative studies of participation in non-democracies as it enables comparisons both of the kinds of actors that are included or excluded and the institutional frameworks developed by states to control participation.

Taking steps towards this endeavour, we argue that the post-Soviet administrative reforms discussed below can be considered an articulation of the international trend towards NPM within the context of a hybrid authoritarian regime, which has created institutions aimed to encourage participation by regime-friendly civic actors, and exclude critics. However, the state’s limited control means that, in some cases, these actors exercise rather more influence in the policy process than intended. In order to demonstrate this, we draw on 50 interviews with members of PCBs and socially oriented NGOs in Moscow, St Petersburg, Samara, Perm and Nizhniy Novgorod between 2012 and 2016. Before we present our findings, we provide some background to the norm of civic participation as it has emerged in post-Soviet Russia.

### **The Development of Civic Participation in Post-Soviet Russia**

Increased civic participation in the policy process has been a key theme in Russian government discourse, which is explicitly linked to ‘unstoppable’ forces of globalisation. As Owen has demonstrated elsewhere (2016), Putin has frequently called upon citizens to shed their passive Soviet-era mentality since ‘welfare hand-outs without taking responsibility for one’s actions are simply no longer possible in the 21st century’ (Putin 2012a). In contrast to the Soviet period, when citizens ‘still expected the state to take care of them’ (Putin 2012b), the post-Soviet era is portrayed as a ruthless international competition for economic advantage, which requires domestic governments to adopt policies of austerity (Putin 2012a). In order that the domestic bureaucracy adapt to the new global environment, the Kremlin has called both for greater civic involvement in policy-making via PCBs, online deliberative *fora*, and public hearings on local government effectiveness (Putin 2012b), and for greater NGO involvement in policy delivery, arguing that civic groups ‘often know the situation on the ground better than the authorities and have unique experience in helping people in difficult situations’ (Medvedev 2010). Accordingly, new institutional fora that enhance forms of civic participation have proliferated.

The first and largest consultative body is the Federal Public Chamber (*Obshchestvennaya Palata*), created in 2005 to facilitate co-operation between citizens and the authorities, represent citizens’ interests, protect the rights of citizens and NGOs and monitor government activities (Rossiiskaya Gazeta, 2005). With a quarter of members directly selected by the

President, this format has been replicated at regional and municipal levels. Public chambers across the Federation play an important part in social life, mediating between conflicting groups, acting as platforms for discussions on social issues and coordinating local NGOs (Evans, 2008; Richter, 2009a; Richter, 2009b; Belokurova 2010; Sakwa, 2011; Stuvøy, 2014; Olisova, 2015).

Legislation governing the Public Chamber also permitted the creation of public councils, (*obshchestvennye soveti*) – groups of well-regarded citizens who give opinions on the activities of government ministries. After several years of undefined legal status, the Presidential decree of May 2011 gave them legally enshrined rights. According to this decree, a public council is an 'advisory body (*soveshchatel'nyi organ*) whose resolutions are non-binding (*rekomentatel'nyye*)' (Rossiiskaya Gazeta, 2011). Public councils, while not possessing executive authority, were given broad legal mandate to observe the work of government ministries in full. However, the decree still stated that the council's final membership was to be approved by the ministry, with the federal-level council co-ordinating regional appointments. Overall, this decree established 102 public councils (Obshchestvennaya Palata RF, 2011: 82), and prompted the proliferation of public councils in the federal and regional offices of virtually all government agencies, departments and services.

Most recently, Federal Law No. 212-FZ 'On the origins of public oversight in the Russian Federation' was signed on 21 July 2014 (Rossiiskaya Gazeta, 2014). This law continues the trend towards increasing the number of consultative bodies attached to government agencies at the federal, regional and municipal levels by stating that civic participation should be enacted through PCBs (Dmitrieva and Strenin, 2014: 63; Owen, forthcoming). The corporate-consultative PCB network is therefore likely to expand in the future.

Concomitantly, opportunities for civic participation at the policy delivery stage have expanded through the increasing inclusion of 'socially oriented NGOs' (hereafter SONGOs). A federal-level funding scheme of presidential grants for civic groups working on social projects was established in 2006 and, in 2010, amendments to the Law on NGOs formalised the category of 'SONGOs'. According to this law, SONGOs are non-profit organisations whose activities aim to solve social problems concerning conservation, historical preservation, sports, education and healthcare, and are entitled to receive support from regional authorities, ranging from tax exemption and training to direct financial sponsorship (Rossiiskaya Gazeta, 2010). This category distinguishes them both from organisations perceived to have a critical or anti-government agenda, such as the election-monitoring organisation, GOLOS, and the longstanding human rights organisation, Memorial, and from national branches of international NGOs, such as Amnesty Russia, Human Rights Watch or Greenpeace.

In 2011, a state register of SONGOs was established, which are offered various funding schemes by the government: federal-level grants to support SONGOs; subsidies to cover utility payments made by SONGOs; and targeted funding for SONGOs from the regional and municipal authorities (Tarasenko, 2013). In 2013, SONGOs were awarded \$75 million in order to implement 'socially beneficial' projects (RIA Novosti, 2013). In addition, under new legislation passed in 2013 and 2015, all levels of government must use small and medium enterprises and SONGOs to provide 15% of the total annual value of their contracts for social service provision (Benevolenski, 2014).

Meanwhile, reforms expanding opportunities for civic participation have been accompanied by increasing restrictions on elections at federal, regional and municipal levels. At the federal

level, out-going President Medvedev stated in 2011 that he and Putin had agreed ‘a long time ago’ that he would step aside for Putin to return to the Presidency (Englund and Lally, 2011), seemingly confirming the electorate’s inability to alter the political fate of the country. The Parliamentary and Presidential elections that followed in 2011-2012 were widely seen to be the most fraudulent since the collapse of the USSR (Ryzhkov, 2011; Gel’man, 2015).

At the regional level, direct gubernatorial elections were abolished in 2004 on national security grounds and replaced by a system of Presidential appointment. They were re-instated briefly by President Medvedev in response to the unrest of 2011-2012, but in 2013 regional parliaments were given the option of cancelling elections, removing elected governors and submitting a list of three potential candidates for the post to the President, asking him to choose for them. In 2013, seventy-seven out of eighty-three regional governors were members of the ruling party, United Russia (Earle, 2013).

At the municipal level, in 2009, the post of ‘city manager’ was introduced, replacing the elected mayor in some cities and working alongside the mayor in others in order ‘depoliticise city governments and to improve the delivery of municipal services to citizens’ (Moses, 2010). The role of manager undercut the authority of the elected mayor and strengthened the link between the Kremlin and the municipal government; governors and their managers were to become more attuned to the politics of the centre than the region (Gel’man and Ryzhenkov, 2011).

Overall, the possibilities for citizens to engage in electoral politics have declined as the mechanisms for non-electoral participation have expanded. As certain state functions are privatised, outsourced and decentralised, citizens and NGOs are required to play a greater role in public administration and, as elections become less effective as a means to gauge public opinion, consultative bodies involving civil society representatives can act as an important ‘feedback’ mechanisms that transmit citizens’ concerns to government (Evans, 2010). Contemporary participatory mechanisms must therefore respond to the demands both of the changing public sector and Russia’s hybrid regime: they must allow a certain extent of participation, but not enough to destabilize structures of power.

### **Limited Pluralism in Policy-Making: Public Consultative Bodies**

Local governments have been actively rearticulating central government discourse in the recruitment of citizens into PCBs, presenting them as ways for patriotic citizens to alleviate social problems by assisting the authorities (Kommersant Vlast’, 2013; Argumenty i Fakty, 2013; Pravitel’stvo Samarskoi Oblasti, 2013). However, the enormous variety both in the level of commitment from PCB members and in the engagement from local authorities means that there is no consistency in their level of influence in policy-making across the Federation. PCBs range from active centres of public debates, such as the federal and regional public chambers (Belokurova, 2010; Stuvøy, 2014; Olisova, 2015) to organisations recognised even by the Federal Public Chamber as being ‘insufficiently effective’ (Obshchestvennaya Palata, 2015: 168). Based on 30 interviews conducted by Owen with current and former members of PCBs in Moscow, St Petersburg and Samara in 2012, this section considers first the ways in which the government constrains the activities of PCBs before giving an example of successful policy change.

Local authorities control the activities of PCBs in two main ways: through the selection process and through selectively engaging on issues raised by PCBs. First, individuals seen to challenge local power structures too directly are often ejected from their PCB or denied re-selection after their term has expired. These ‘independent’ activists are frequently replaced with former



government officials or with celebrities with no relevant experience.<sup>i</sup> Others recalled how the authorities ignored their suggestions for new members, choosing instead people seen as conservative and apolitical.<sup>ii</sup> Several respondents stated that if the selection process were reformed to reduce government influence over membership, PCBs would be able to function better as platforms for dialogue.<sup>iii</sup>

Secondly, PCBs facilitate leverage in some areas but not in others. Issues of national importance, such as Pussy Riot, Mikhail Khodorkovsky, Sergei Magnitsky and the law on Foreign Agents were cited as areas where the government has refused to change position, despite significant lobbying via PCBs.<sup>iv</sup> One respondent stated that genuine policy debate was only possible on areas that do not touch Putin's power vertical.<sup>v</sup> Another stated that if state departments were already areas of on-going reforms, PCBs would be more likely to influence outcomes.<sup>vi</sup> A third, who had been part of the development of the public council legislation, stated that the problem lay in their institutional dependence on the government institution they are supposed to monitor. In his view, in order to influence policy outcomes, public councils should be 'real, serious structures, as independent as possible from the government departments to which they belong.'<sup>vii</sup>

Despite these limitations, virtually all PCB members were able to mention an occasion when they had successfully influenced policy outcomes. Examples of successful lobbying included the introduction of courts of appeal, improvements in prison conditions, changing the law on military service to exempt PhD students from conscription, conservation of city architecture, monitoring of the local government budget and work on the liberalisation of the NGO law in 2009.

One example of a relatively influential public council is the Public Council under the Moscow Prosecutor's Office, created in 2008 in order to 'monitor violations of rights and freedoms of citizens; consider questions about improving collaboration between the Prosecutor's Office and the public... and attract the public to collaboration with the Office' (Memorial, 2009). One member, a prominent lawyer, explained the extent of the council's influence:

'We in Moscow created a Public Council of the Moscow Prosecutor's Office. That's where I go – I even head it... But I have to say that it is much less effective than we hoped when we founded it. But there are some questions that we cannot resolve without dealing with the Prosecutor. We alone cannot deal with them – we have no leverage. We do manage to resolve some issues, but again, we were hoping for more effective co-operation. But its creation and existence is needed in my opinion. There is a possibility of dialogue.'

Another member, representing a well-known Moscow human rights organisation in this council, detailed the struggle to try to convince the Office to close bogus homeowners associations (*tovarishchestvo sobstvennikov zhil'ya*), which were extracting large sums of money from residents for fake repairs, among other things (Maksimov, 2013). According to him,

'We found a common language. Based on our letters, they began to close homeowners associations. They supported us, and said: "Yes, that's right. If they have been founded wrongly, they should be closed." Our NGO showed these organisations were fake... but the authorities, again, did not completely follow it up. They should have initiated criminal proceedings, which they did not do. But still, in general, they unconditionally supported us in the courts, and as a whole, it was a successful campaign...'

In 2012, two thousand bogus homeowners' associations were closed in Moscow (Newsru.com, 2012).

According to the Federal Public Chamber, these types of organisation enable 'a means of democratic participation in which party-political conflict as such is absent' (Obshchestvennaya Palata, 2011: 5). Nonetheless, some (though by no means all) PCBs have a certain, though limited, influence on decision-making and political outcomes (Chebankova, 2013: 114-115; Stuvøy 2014; Olisova, 2015; Owen, 2015; Aasland, Berg-Nordlie and Bogdanova, 2016). It is clear that the PCB network is intended to provide vital policy input to a regime that seeks to avoid outright political competition.

### **Limited Pluralism in Policy Delivery: Socially Oriented NGOs**

In the case of SONGOs, the NPM-style reforms implemented since 2010 have undoubtedly affected their independence. Many of the 20 SONGOs interviewed by Bindman in Moscow, St Petersburg, Perm and Nizhniy Novgorod in 2015 and 2016 highlighted the numerous constraints faced by this type of organisation in trying to continue and develop their activities, in particular the 'Foreign Agent' Law, which has discouraged many from applying for funding from abroad. Russia's ongoing financial crisis has also led to major cutbacks in the number of individual charitable donations and is likely to lead to significant shortfalls in funding available from local authorities.<sup>viii</sup> Even when an organisation is successful in obtaining local government funding, this tends to be available for only a year at a time before another funding application has to be made, making it difficult for organisations to plan ahead, and making them much more reliant on other funding sources, such as individual and corporate donations and social enterprise (Bogdanova and Bindman, 2016; Krasnopolskaya et al., 2015). At present, only 16% of all Russian NGOs receive municipal or regional government funding, and only 10% receive any federal financial support (Krasnopolskaya et al., 2015). As a result, they have welcomed the recent legislative changes theoretically enabling SONGOs to join a formal register of organisations through which they can compete for government tenders to become direct providers of social services. Several organisations stated that alternative providers could indeed improve the standard of social services and supported the creation of a market in which state, non-profit and for-profit organisations could compete:

We need some kind of competitive market [for social service delivery]. When there's competition you see development and when there isn't, everything stagnates and ends up being bad for everyone. Commercial and non-commercial organisations are a real help to the government.<sup>ix</sup>

The main advantage of this reform would be the creation of competition because, at the moment, the state social service sector is very under-developed, the heads of state providers don't have to sit and think about how to attract clients because there's no alternative to them so they have become lazy and don't try to change or develop anything. So competition would be the main way to make them do this.<sup>x</sup>

It appears that some SONGOs endorse the NPM-style approaches to welfare governance put forward by the Ministry of Economic Development. In many respects, this is hardly surprising given the constrained political and financial framework within which Russian NGOs must operate at present. Furthermore, the welfare reforms offer the prospect of both greater financial stability to SONGOs joining the official register and the chance to have a greater impact on policy development and delivery.

However, many of the NGOs interviewed as part of this study expressed great scepticism as to how these reforms would be implemented:

Everything here operates top-down – and the regional authorities are forced to cooperate with charitable organisations in some way, even if they don't want to... The government doesn't want to change the system so these measures are just a formality, they are there because they are perceived as the right thing to do and that's how they do it in the West.<sup>xi</sup>

On the one hand, there is this open competition [for resources] and on the other there are many obstacles which stop us applying. Hardly any of the organisations we know and work with have joined the official register of SONGOs.<sup>xii</sup>

What often happens is that a programme is formally set out but in reality, the mechanisms for implementing it do not exist.<sup>xiii</sup>

This perception that everything happens 'top-down' in the social policy sphere and that the reforms are simply for show indicates that there is a significant gap in understanding and expectation between the high-level proponents of the reforms, who seek to increase innovation and alternative provision in the social service sector, and the potential providers of these services. This calls into question how the reforms might be implemented if the very organisations they seek to target are less than enthusiastic about participating.

Furthermore, several SONGOs resisted the idea of becoming formal providers of social services, preferring to maintain a cordial but detached relationship with policymakers. They criticised the neoliberal nature of the reforms which, some pointed out, were an attempt by the state to divest itself of social responsibilities, exert greater control over NGOs operating in this area, and try to force non-state providers into a role they were not ready for.

It's obvious that any transfer of functions and funding from the state to NGOs will at least to some extent enable greater state control over those organisations which start to offer social services as part of a government tender. And in Russia you cannot assume that a charity will be able to assume responsibility for a significant proportion of service provision because the sector is not very developed.<sup>xiv</sup>

There are certain major services which the state should offer, and there are some small-scale services which could potentially be handed over to NGOs. But there's a risk that the services offered by commercial and non-commercial organisations will not be effective. Organisations which want to make easy money but are unable to provide quality services might apply for these tenders. And as a result these services will either be of low quality or will not be offered at all.<sup>xv</sup>

Overall, there are a number of implications for the potential success of increasing civic participation in policy delivery. While many SONGOs theoretically welcome the possibility of closer cooperation with the authorities, and the increased access to funding that this could bring, few expect the current reforms to be implemented successfully or for them to have any fundamental impact on their day-to-day activities. This indicates that, while the federal 'centre' may in theory be committed to imposing modes of welfare governance inspired by the global shift towards NPM, even in a semi-authoritarian system such as Russia, the non-state actors that are targets of these measures retain some capacity to side-step or even resist such reforms.

They also appear to be relatively confident in their ability to continue to do this, without in any sense positioning themselves as in some way opposing or threatening the overall structure of the system. Therefore, in the short-term at least, the reforms are unlikely to do much to change the existing *status quo*. The analysis suggests that non-governmental actors have a limited capacity to influence the overall structure of governance, engaging with it when it is perceived to be beneficial, but also exercising the choice to opt out. Although the category of ‘socially oriented’ NGOs was created to make a political distinction between types of NGO, even these supposedly ‘apolitical’ organisations have the capacity to influence the direction and impact of the federal reforms (see also Kulmala, 2016).

## **Conclusion**

The near-globally accepted public sector reform package comprising policies of privatisation of state assets, outsourcing of state functions to NGOs, charities and businesses, and the decentralisation of powers to local government have reduced the state’s ability to create and deliver effective public policy. This has increased the need for states to create mechanisms that boost the involvement of non-state actors in the policy process, including in non-democratic regimes such as Russia. Public consultative bodies and socially oriented NGOs have been created for this purpose.

The consolidation of PCBs into an extensive network that advises and monitors official activity at all levels of government demonstrates a recognition by the Kremlin that increased levels of citizen feedback are vital for effective policy development. Yet although, PCBs allow some citizens a place at the policy-making table, this place is provided solely on the government’s terms and can be withdrawn at any time. Likewise, the evolution of SONGOs indicates that the Kremlin has adopted the idea that NGOs are more cost-effective, innovative and responsive to clients’ needs. Yet, although many SONGOs appear to be taking cautious advantage of opportunities for greater role in policy delivery, the state has tried to strengthen its control over non-state organisations acting in this sphere.

We now return to the questions we posed at the beginning of this essay: why has the Russian government created new avenues for public participation in policy processes and what effect have they had on policy-making and delivery? To answer the first question, the new institutional framework for involving civic actors in policy processes is characterised by a desire on the one hand to harness the knowledge and abilities of citizens and civic groups in place of state departments perceived to be bureaucratic and inefficient, and to control and curtail this participation on the other.

We argue that these countervailing tendencies can be conceptualised as *limited pluralism*. Overall, Linz’s exposition of limited pluralism channelled through corporatist structures in authoritarian regimes corresponds to the kind of civic participation emerging in contemporary Russia. The PCB network represents the creation of participatory institutions that run parallel to electoral modes of political representation, which themselves are often manipulated to serve the interests of elites. The category of SONGOs is designed to allow the government to distinguish between organisations considered useful and those considered inconvenient, and to devolve certain responsibilities in the social sector to those useful ones. Furthermore, the expansion of limited pluralism in Russia suggests that the Putin regime is developing a state infrastructure that does not merely replicate that of Western liberal-democratic states, but selectively deploys some of the key principles for domestic regime consolidation. Indeed, it indicates that ostensibly ‘democratic’ norms such as citizen involvement in the policy process can be used by non-democratic states to channel participation into narrow, apolitical forums.

Second, the application of the concept of limited pluralism raises the question of the extent to which other non-democratic states incorporate alternative voices into the policy process, and the means by which they do so. Understanding the mechanisms for managing civic participation in non-democratic states adopting principles of New Public Management allows us to begin to explain how such regimes maintain stability while conducting disruptive public sector reform.

Although PCBs and SONGOs are intended as a means for local authorities to co-ordinate a select number of non-state voices in the policy process, the fact that a level of pluralism exists within the system means that this process does not always happen as smoothly as the authorities might wish.

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- <sup>ii</sup> Interview, historical enlightenment organisation, St Petersburg, 13/07/2012; Interview, NGO monitoring police corruption, St Petersburg, 21/08/2012; Interview, historical enlightenment organisation, St Petersburg, 7/09/2012; Interview, activist, political party ‘Yabloko Samara’, Samara, 11/08/2012; Interview, NGO supporting disabled people, Samara, 13/08/2012.
- <sup>iii</sup> Interview, NGO monitoring police corruption, Moscow, 6/11/2012; Interview, prison reform NGO, Moscow, 7/11/2012; Interview, human rights organisation, Moscow, 9/11/2012; Interview, soldiers’ mothers’ advocacy organisation, St Petersburg, 22/08/2012; Interview, historical enlightenment organisation, St Petersburg, 7/09/2012; Interview, public policy expert, Higher School of Economics, St Petersburg, 29/10/2012; Interview, human rights group, St Petersburg, 24/08/2012.
- <sup>iv</sup> This law introduced restrictions on NGOs receiving foreign funding, forcing them to undergo onerous official checks and to register themselves as ‘foreign agents’ or risk large fines and the suspension of their activity.
- <sup>v</sup> Interview, human rights organisation, Moscow, 30/08/2012.
- <sup>vi</sup> Interview, NGO advocating legal reform, Moscow, 9/11/2012.
- <sup>vii</sup> Interview, human rights organisation, Moscow, 9/11/2012.
- <sup>viii</sup> Interview, disability charity, St Petersburg, 24/04/2015; Interview, NGO supporting women and children, Nizhniy Novgorod, 25/02/2016; Interview, children’s charity, Nizhniy Novgorod, 29/02/2016; Interview, children’s charity, Nizhniy Novgorod, 2/03/2016.
- <sup>ix</sup> Interview, charity supporting the elderly, St Petersburg, 28/04/2015.
- <sup>x</sup> Interview, disability NGO, St Petersburg, 25/04/2015.
- <sup>xi</sup> Interview, homeless charity, St Petersburg, 25/04/2015.
- <sup>xii</sup> Interview, disability NGO, St Petersburg, 25/04/2015.
- <sup>xiii</sup> Interview, charity supporting the elderly, Moscow, 30/04/2015.
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