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Civic Participation in a Hybrid Regime: Limited Pluralism in Policymaking and Delivery in Contemporary Russia

This article asks why the Russian government has developed new avenues for public participation in policymaking and delivery and assesses the extent to which these avenues introduce pluralism into these processes. Drawing on 50 interviews with individuals and citizens' groups involved in either public consultative bodies or socially oriented NGOs, the article demonstrates the government's desire to harness the knowledge and abilities of citizens and civic groups in place of state departments perceived to be bureaucratic and inefficient, while controlling and curtailing their participation. Arguing that these countervailing tendencies can be conceptualized as limited pluralism, a category elaborated by Juan Linz and Alfred Stepan, we show that citizens and civic groups are able to influence policy outcomes to varying extents using these mechanisms.

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

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 (Beck 1999; Cooley and Heathershaw 2017; Fukuyama 1989). 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 organizations and attached as loan conditionalities by international financial institutions. Yet there is a great deal of regional, national

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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 privatization, decentralization 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 Ong 2006; Robertson 1995; Swyngedouw 2004).

This article 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 policymaking and delivery. With the aim of contributing to the under-researched field of civic participation in non-democracies, we address two questions: first, we consider why the Russian government has developed avenues for public participation in policy processes and, second, we assess the extent to which these avenues introduce pluralism into policymaking and delivery. We argue that the Kremlin has developed participatory mechanisms in order to establish 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 attempt at control has been only partially successful. As with all institutional reforms, unintended consequences have emerged from these changes: 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 (Colton and Hale 2009; Diamond 2002; Levitsky and Way 2010; March 2009; McMann 2006; Petrov et al. 2014; Robertson 2010; Treisman 2011). These works demonstrate 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 promoted by the Kremlin that aim to increase the involvement of citizens and NGOs in policymaking and delivery. Regarding policymaking, 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 (hereafter SONGOs) are becoming increasingly active in public service provision. In recent years, electoral reforms have eroded formal avenues of participation, 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 conceptualize this new participatory architecture of the Russian state? Neither liberal-democratic nor Marxist in orientation, this architecture, we argue, instead most closely corresponds to what Juan Linz and Alfred Stepan have termed 'organic statism' (see Linz 2000; Stepan 2001). According to this model, individualism and elections are downplayed, and a strong, interventionist 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 decentralized political participation of semi-autonomous functional groups' (Stepan 2001: 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 characterize 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 twentieth 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 because, although the non-state groups may differ from those elaborated in the 1970s, the contemporary Russian 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; Javeline and Lindemann-Komarova 2010; Uhlin 2006). Likewise, it distances itself from the normative and Eurocentric implications of theories of civil society more broadly (see, for example, Cohen and Arato 1992; Kaldor 2003; Seligman 1992). Instead, it centres on the role of the state in Russia’s social sphere and highlights 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, we have two goals. First, we aim to propose a vocabulary that might help to conceptualize the changes taking place in Russia’s reforming state bureaucracy and the impact these changes have on civic participation. Second, we aim to increase understanding of the ways in which non-democratic governments seek to coordinate civic participation in policy processes more broadly.

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). These principles include decentralization of budget responsibility to local governments, privatization 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 (Clarke et al. 2007; Denters and Rose 2005; Flynn 2007; Geddes 2005; Peck 2010: 9). In the West, NPM was utilized to steer the state bureaucracy away from the so-called progressive public administration of the mid-twentieth century, characterized 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 Laegreid 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 reconceptualization of the relationship between citizens and government (Denters and Rose 2005; Geddes 2005). 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 policymaking, 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 policymaking process has become necessary in order to fill the inevitable knowledge gap. Jon Pierre and B. 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 Peters 2000: 4; see also Keane 2009; Swyngedouw 2005; Vibert 2007). Clearly, this prescription applies to non-democracies as well.

In the case of Russia, some have argued that participation by non-state actors 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 (Cook 2007, 2013; Romanov 2008; Verheijen and Dobrolyubova 2007; Wengle and Rasell 2008) and increased civic participation in the policy process in particular (Aasland et al. 2016; Bindman 2015; Bogdanova and Bindman 2016; Hemment 2009; Myhre and Berg-Nordlie 2016; Tarasenko 2015). 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 et al. 1999); rather, as elsewhere, Russian lawmakers reshape these norms to suit the context of the hybrid authoritarian regime.

Civic participation in the policy processes of non-democracies remains under-researched since studies of authoritarianism tend to focus on power structures at the national and elite levels (Brooker 2009; Brownlee 2007; Gandhi 2010; Pepinski 2014; Schlumberger 2007; Svolik 2009). 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 engagement in policy processes prevailed in the post-Stalinist Soviet Union, such as interest groups (Skilling and Griffiths 1973), local soviets (Friedgut 1979; Hahn 1988) and monitory 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 (Bell 2015; Duckett and Wang 2013; He and Warren 2011; Mertha 2009; Zhu 2008). Likewise, Jayasuriya and Rodan's (2007) study of South-East 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). Concomitantly, 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 of the institutional frameworks developed by states to control participation.

We demonstrate below that the post-Soviet administrative reforms can be considered an articulation of the international trend towards NPM within the context of a hybrid authoritarian regime, which has developed institutions aimed to encourage participation by regime-friendly civic actors and to exclude critics. However, since the state exercises only limited control over this participation, 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 Nizhny 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 globalization. As Catherine Owen has demonstrated elsewhere (2016), Vladimir 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 twenty-first 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 adapts to the new global environment, the Kremlin has called both for greater civic involvement in policymaking via PCBs, online deliberative forums and public hearings on local government effectiveness (Putin 2012b), and for greater NGO involvement in policy delivery, since 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 forums 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

cooperation 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 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 (Belokurova 2010; Evans 2008; Olisova 2015; Richter 2009a, 2009b; Sakwa 2011; Stuvøy 2014).

Legislation governing the Public Chamber also permitted the creation of public councils, (*obshchestvennye sovety*) – 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 a broad legal mandate to observe the work of government ministries in full. However, the decree still stated that the council's final membership should be approved by the ministry, with the federal-level council coordinating regional appointments. Overall, this decree 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 proliferation 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 Styrin 2014: 63; Owen 2017). The corporate-consultative PCB network is therefore likely to expand in the future.

Opportunities for civic participation at the policy delivery stage have expanded through the development of 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 formalized the category of 'SONGOs'. According to this law, SONGOs are non-profit organizations whose activities aim to solve social problems concerning conservation, historical preservation, sports, education and health care, 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 organizations perceived to have a critical or anti-government agenda, such as the election-monitoring organization, GOLOS, and the long-standing human rights organization, 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, to which various funding schemes are offered 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 per cent 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 2011–12 were widely seen to be the most fraudulent since the collapse of the Soviet Union (Gel’man 2015; Ryzhkov 2011).

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 reinstated briefly by President Medvedev in response to the unrest of 2011–12, 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, 77 out of 83 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; regional governors and their city 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 privatized, outsourced and decentralized, 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 important ‘feedback’ mechanisms that transmit citizens’ concerns to government (Evans 2010). Government-organized participatory mechanisms must therefore respond to the demands 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 POLICYMAKING: PUBLIC CONSULTATIVE BODIES

Public consultative forums have multiplied across the Federation since 2011; 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 policymaking. PCBs range from active centres of public debates, such as the federal and regional public chambers (Belokurova 2010; Stuvøy 2014) to organizations recognized even by the Public Chamber itself 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. In line with other research, it suggests that despite their institutional dependence on local authorities, some PCBs exercise limited influence in decision-making and political outcomes (Aasland et al. 2016; Olisova 2015; Owen 2015; Stuvøy 2014).

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.¹ Respondents recalled how the authorities ignored their suggestions for new members, choosing instead people seen as conservative and apolitical.² Several 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.³

Second, PCBs may influence policy outcomes 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.⁴ One respondent stated that genuine policy debate was only possible on areas that do not touch Putin’s ‘power vertical’.⁵ Another stated that if state departments were already areas of ongoing reforms, PCBs would be more likely to influence outcomes.⁶ A third, who had been part of the development of the public council legislation, stated that the problem lay in their formal 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’.⁷

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 liberalization of the NGO law in 2009. It is beyond the scope of this article to assess levels of influence in each of these spheres; in order to demonstrate how PCBs can effect policy change, we highlight the way in which one relatively influential public council, the public council under the Moscow Prosecutor’s Office, successfully influenced a policy outcome. This public council was 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 . . . However, 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. Individuals on their own cannot deal with them – we have no leverage. As a public council, we do manage to resolve some issues but, again, we were hoping for more effective cooperation. But its creation and existence is needed, in my opinion. Through the council, there is a possibility of dialogue.

Another member, representing a well-known Moscow human rights organization 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 with the prosecutor. Thanks to our letters, they began to close homeowners' associations. They supported us, saying: 'Yes, that's right. If they have been founded wrongly, they should be closed'. Our NGO demonstrated that these organizations 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.

Indeed, in 2012, 2,000 bogus homeowners' associations were closed in Moscow (Newsru.com 2012).

According to the Federal Public Chamber, these types of organization enable 'a means of democratic participation in which party-political conflict as such is absent' (Obshchestvennaya Palata 2011: 5). In short, the PCB network is intended to provide vital policy input to a regime that seeks to avoid outright political competition – that is, to produce a limited form of pluralism. The research presented here suggests that these organizations largely fulfil this aim: although the government has a relatively firm grasp on the activities of PCBs, citizens may occasionally influence policy outcomes.

LIMITED PLURALISM IN POLICY DELIVERY: SOCIALLY ORIENTED NGOS

SONGOS' ability to influence political outcomes is considerably stronger than PCBs', thanks to their relative autonomy from the state,

although the NPM-style reforms implemented since 2010 have undoubtedly reduced this autonomy. Many of the 20 SONGOs interviewed by Eleanor Bindman in Moscow, St Petersburg, Perm and Nizhniy Novgorod in 2015 and 2016 highlighted the numerous constraints faced by this type of organization in trying to continue and develop their activities, in particular the Law on Foreign Agents, 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.⁸ Even when an organization 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 organizations 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 per cent of all Russian NGOs receive municipal or regional government funding, and only 10 per cent 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 organizations through which they can compete for government tenders to become direct providers of social services. Several organizations 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 organizations 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 organizations are a real help to the government.⁹

The main advantage of this reform would be the creation of competition because, at the moment, the state social service sector is very underdeveloped, 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.¹⁰

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 organizations 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.¹¹

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 organizations we know and work with have joined the official register of SONGOs.¹²

What often happens is that a programme is formally set out but in reality the mechanisms for implementing it do not exist.¹³

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 organizations 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 criticized 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 organizations 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.¹⁴

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 organizations will not be effective. Organizations 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.¹⁵

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, the non-state actors that are targets of these measures retain some capacity to side-step or even resist such reforms, even in a semi-authoritarian system such as Russia. 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, unlike PCBs, which must operate within the limits set by the government, SONGOs possess a greater degree of independence, engaging with government reforms when they are 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' organizations, thanks to their ability to withdraw from government schemes, 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 privatization of state assets, outsourcing of state functions to NGOs, charities and businesses, and the decentralization 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. In this article, we have examined the ways in which Russia has

tailored this involvement to suit the particularities of its hybrid domestic regime. To conclude, we return to the two questions posed in the introduction: why has the government developed these new mechanisms, and to what extent do they pluralize the policy process?

Considering the first question, we have shown that both PCBs and SONGOs have been created in the context of Russia's NPM-style public sector reforms that aim to increase civic participation in policy-making and delivery. 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. 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. However, the legal frameworks of both the PCB network and the SONGO category also highlight the Kremlin's desire to control and limit participation.

Considering the second question, we have shown that these mechanisms pluralize the policy process to a limited extent. In the case of PCBs, this participation is very limited due to their dependence on state structures: although PCBs allow some citizens a place at the policymaking table and enable them to effect policy change in some cases, this place is provided solely on the government's terms and can be withdrawn at any time. SONGOs are much more independent than PCBs and thus have a greater opportunity to influence policy, both at the policymaking and delivery stages. Although the government has tried to exert greater control over their activities, they are able to choose to opt in or out of government initiatives, a fact which can threaten the overall functioning of these initiatives. Thus, while participatory mechanisms are intended as a means for local authorities to coordinate 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, particularly in the case of SONGOs.

We have argued that these countervailing tendencies in the state's framework for participation can be conceptualized as limited pluralism. The PCB network allows the government to listen to some civic voices but ignore others; the category of SONGOs is designed to allow the government to distinguish between organizations considered useful and those considered inconvenient, and to devolve certain responsibilities in the social sector to those useful ones.

Furthermore, the government's expansion of limited pluralism 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 with a view to domestic regime consolidation. Indeed, it indicates that ostensibly 'democratic' norms such as citizen involvement in the policy process can be employed by non-democratic states in an attempt 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 NPM allows us to begin to explain how such regimes maintain stability while conducting potentially disruptive public sector reform.

NOTES

- ¹ Interview, historical enlightenment organization, St Petersburg, 13 July 2012; Interview, NGO seeking to widen cooperation between local NGOs and authorities, St Petersburg, 21 August 2012; Interview, historical enlightenment organization, St Petersburg, 7 September 2012; Interview, human rights organization, Moscow, 20 July 2012; Interview, army reform NGO, Moscow, 23 July 2012; Interview, NGO advocating democratic reform, Moscow, 30 August 2012; Interview, NGO monitoring police corruption, Moscow, 6 November 2012; Interview, NGO advocating prison reform, Moscow, 7 November 2012; Interview, human rights organization, Moscow, 9 November 2012.
- ² Interview, historical enlightenment organization, St Petersburg, 13 July 2012; Interview, NGO monitoring police corruption, St Petersburg, 21 August 2012; Interview, historical enlightenment organization, St Petersburg, 7 September 2012; Interview, activist, political party Yabloko Samara, Samara, 11 August 2012; Interview, NGO supporting disabled people, Samara, 13 August 2012.
- ³ Interview, NGO monitoring police corruption, Moscow, 6 November 2012; Interview, prison reform NGO, Moscow, 7 November 2012; Interview, human rights organization, Moscow, 9 November 2012; Interview, soldiers' mothers' advocacy organization, St Petersburg, 22 August 2012; Interview, historical enlightenment organization, St Petersburg, 7 September 2012; Interview, public policy expert, Higher School of Economics, St Petersburg, 29 October 2012; Interview, human rights group, St Petersburg, 24 August 2012.
- ⁴ 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.

- ⁵ Interview, human rights organization, Moscow, 30 August 2012.
- ⁶ Interview, NGO advocating legal reform, Moscow, 9 November 2012.
- ⁷ Interview, human rights organization, Moscow, 9 November 2012.
- ⁸ Interview, disability charity, St Petersburg, 24 April 2015; Interview, NGO supporting women and children, Nizhny Novgorod, 25 February 2016; Interview, children's charity, Nizhny Novgorod, 29 February 2016; Interview, children's charity, Nizhny Novgorod, 2 March 2016.
- ⁹ Interview, charity supporting the elderly, St Petersburg, 28 April 2015.
- ¹⁰ Interview, disability NGO, St Petersburg, 25 April 2015.
- ¹¹ Interview, homeless charity, St Petersburg, 25 April 2015.
- ¹² Interview, disability NGO, St Petersburg, 25 April 2015.
- ¹³ Interview, charity supporting the elderly, Moscow, 30 April 2015.
- ¹⁴ Interview, homeless charity, St Petersburg, 25 April 2015.
- ¹⁵ Interview, disability NGO, 30 April 2015.

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