Promoting Democracy in Postcommunist Ukraine:
The Contradictory Outcomes of US Aid to Women's NGOs

Kateryna Pishchikova

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Introduction

The collapse of the Soviet Union brought about many fascinating developments in the former socialist republics. Sudden change in all spheres of life was accompanied by an information avalanche. New and old ideas and concepts, works of art and ways of living were either rediscovered from within – as, for example, alternative (*samizdat*[1]) literature and films – or brought in from the outside. Everywhere new initiatives and arrangements were coming up that had previously been unthinkable, from new schools with alternative or more advanced teaching programs to new criminal networks, from new television programs to new consumer products. Along came also a new language that was to give names, at times clumsy or misplaced, to the new reality.

My attention was attracted by so called "public organizations" (*obshchestvennie organizatsii*) that had appeared in great numbers since the end of communism. Organizations of this name existed also before 1991; they were formal branches of the Communist Party that dealt with particular social concerns, such as youth or women's issues. However, the "public organizations" of the 1990s seemed different. In some cases, new offices were being rented, equipment installed, and working conditions were more luxurious than what other public or private organizations could afford at the time. In other cases, the organizations consisted of no more than a phone, a fax, and an Internet connection in somebody's living room. Whatever the practical arrangement, the purposes and the activities of these "public organizations" remained unclear to an outsider's eye. In fact, neither their activities nor their sources of income were "public;" a kind of secretive veil was draped around the new world of these organizations. The people working in these organizations were often perceived as a new type of entrepreneur – those who know how to get "grants" to pay their own salaries.

References to "grants, funds, and projects" evoked a language that was both technically specific and mystifying because its real-world referents remained elusive. I started to explore some questions that

seemed evident but, surprisingly, had not been raised before: Why do these organizations have to register as "public organizations;" what are those "grants" they receive; how are they different from salaries or profit; who grants them and for what? Knowledge of English vocabulary was important for understanding the answers I received. However, those answers raised new questions. It turned out that the correct name of "public organizations" was "non-governmental organizations" or NGOs, that they had to be supported in the name of "civil society," and that "grants" were a part of the "assistance" that Ukraine was receiving to an unprecedented extent from various "donors" after it became officially independent in 1991. I was discovering a whole new world, in which the enchantment with the concept of "civil society" was as striking as the skepticism towards "public organizations" that I encountered in Ukraine.

The "projects" and "grants" given to Ukrainian organizations were described by the donors as the most effective means to facilitate democracy in Ukraine, to ensure that the democratic change would be truly encompassing and long-lasting, and to make Ukrainian people more democratically minded. In Ukraine, however, these initiatives were mostly perceived as a peculiar money flow that was going to a small group of people on obscure terms. These initiatives were believed to be short-term, insufficient, and ineffective. The two sides of the story clearly did not match, and yet both foreign donors and "public organizations"/NGOs were speaking about the same "projects" and accountable for the same money. The discrepancy was so obvious that both sides must have been aware of it as well. This has brought me to the main puzzle of the book: Are the donors blind or do they just not care? Are the locals wicked or just plain stupid? How is it that both sides continue to do what they are doing? What are the mechanisms that enable the meaningful functioning of a civil society assistance discourse in Ukraine despite negative outcomes and wide-spread criticisms?

This book takes seriously the theoretical assumptions of interpretative-constructivist approach. It holds that there is a mutually constitutive relationship between discursive and material realities or, to put it differently, between words and deeds. This book shows that the way Ukrainians and foreign donors talk about foreign assistance to civil society has an impact on what form foreign assistance as well as civil society supported by foreign donors take. Therefore, by looking at the language in use or discourse[2] as it is usually called in the constructivist literature, one can elicit a number of significant social and political processes and understand their nature.

I tackle these questions by making a detailed inquiry into foreign assistance to women's NGOs in Ukraine by the United States Agency

for International Development (USAID) delivered in the period from 1992 to 2009.[3] In addition to the relevance of prior personal knowledge,[4] the choice of the donor and the recipient in this research is based on their perceived mutual importance. For almost two decades, Ukraine has been one of the largest recipients of American assistance, whose significance for the U.S. has been stated on many occasions. In the 1990s, the USAID program in Ukraine was the third largest in the Agency after Egypt and Israel, and it remains one of the key recipients of American assistance today. Overall, at the time this book is going to press, the United States government has spent almost four billion in technical assistance to Ukraine. The country is particularly important for the U.S. due to its position between Russia and the EU, bordering on the NATO states and being an aspiring NATO candidate itself.[5] Even as the War on Terror and subsequent events have drastically changed the core focus of American foreign policy, Ukraine – a key link in the transportation of Russian gas to Western markets and in general an important area for Russia's revived imperialistic tendencies – remains an important country for the United States.

United States Agency for International Development (USAID) is different from some other foreign donors operating in Ukraine in several respects. It is a governmental agency whose vision and policy are explicitly connected to American foreign policy and security interests. Its primary goal is to sustain the national interests of the United States, whose role in world politics is fairly distinct and at times controversial compared to other states. Being a federal agency, it faces many more practical constraints in terms of accountability and programming than other types of donors, such as private foundations or (international) non-governmental organizations ((I)NGOs). In fact, some practitioners argue that these characteristics of USAID set it aside from other assistance efforts and limit the more general applicability of findings and recommendations developed about it. Such a remark would have been difficult to argue with, had the world of international assistance not been showing evidence to the contrary. Notwithstanding one's commonsensical expectation of what different political actors stand for, within the span of little more than a decade it has become increasingly difficult to tell the mission statement of USAID from that of Oxfam International or the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs (and, in some parts, even from that of the Royal Dutch Shell). This book, therefore, aims at eliciting those core points of "assistance rationale" that make assistance a significant political process on a global scale rather than just a set of programs implemented by a particular organization.

During my fieldwork in one Ukrainian city, I went to interview the head of a women's NGO. The NGO was based in her flat and when I entered, I discovered a living room, in which among the usual furniture and some personal things a computer and a fax machine stood. What was the meaning of those objects? They were there not as mere signs of the increasing use of modern technology by the Ukrainian population but had been purchased with a grant that was – according to the donor's definition – part of the "technical assistance to promote democracy in Ukraine." For the head of the NGO herself, these objects were an integral part of creating an NGO. Such an understanding of a computer and a fax machine in somebody's living room was not obvious. However, if officials from the donor agency that provided such "assistance" had come to visit in order to see how it "was promoting democracy in Ukraine," they would not have been surprised to see a computer and a fax machine. They would not have been expecting to find a peaceful demonstration of human rights activists in that living room as a sign of "democracy in Ukraine." To them a computer and a fax machine would have made sense.

It is these kinds of observations that lead me to argue that things do not just make sense as such; they are *made* to make sense. The goal of this book is to find out how exactly this happens with respect to foreign assistance to civil society. My core assumption is that foreign assistance to civil society cannot be seen simply as yet another imperialistic project, a means to impose American or Western hegemony onto the world. In order to understand what really makes such assistance function over extended periods of time in highly dynamic contexts, one has to adopt a more interactive model, in which the voices of both foreign and local actors are recognized. Misplaced names, foreign words, clumsy phrases, unintelligible adaptations of English words in written and spoken Russian and Ukrainian are not just alien creatures flown in by foreign guests. They are also actively employed by local actors to make sense of new and old realities, and even to create realities. Building on several theoretical premises of discourse analysis,[6] this book focuses on different meanings of foreign assistance to civil society that are created, translated or (re)enacted in different contexts where donors and aid recipients interact, directly or indirectly.

Different meanings of foreign assistance to civil society are seen as both constituted by social and political practices and at the same time constitutive of political activities in that they enable certain forms of social and political action and constrain others. In other words there would be no civil society specialists and centers within the donor agencies without the civil society discourse; at the same time, these

institutionas, once established, influence the development of civil society discourse. Institutional changes within USAID – such as the foundation of the Center for Democracy and Governance, the introduction of civil society specialist positions, and budget appropriations for the promotion of civil society and democracy – are all inconceivable without the idea that the American government has a role to play in the political transformation of the former Soviet Block and that such a transformation should entail creating and supporting civil societies in the respective countries. At the same time, such institutional and material factors can gradually transform the discourse and change its meanings. Indeed, as I show in the following chapters, the scope of the change that has occurred within civil society assistance discourse over the last two decades is striking.

This position, however, should not be seen as a reiteration of idealist arguments in the fashion of the realism/idealism debate.[7] Seeing every object constituted as an object of discourse does not imply that there is no world external to thought; it asserts instead that every object with its specificity is always constituted as such within a discourse.[8] To come back to the example I gave above, there is no doubt that with the help of donor funding NGOs buy equipment and furniture and that these items are physically present in a rented office space or private home. But whether the specificity of these objects is constructed in terms of "technical assistance," "creating open and free access through the Internet to Western concepts of civil society" or "strengthening the NGO sector"[9] depends on the particular discourse that is employed. Moreover, the particular meaning of these objects has implications for how and to what ends they can be utilized.

Just like practices, discourses are contextual; they do not exist in some kind of abstract world of ideas but only during particular moments when they are enacted by certain actors in a certain setting. One cannot think that once a discourse is established, it is merely recited whenever and wherever needed as if it were a play script. The assistance discourse does not exist just in the head of the USAID Assistance Administrator; it is (re)enacted in the daily operations of USAID, it is further taken up by various assistance-implementing partners, and it travels even further to the assistance recipients. This means that different actors interact in particular sites and in the process (re)construct the meaning of assistance.[10] In other words, this is a situated (or "sited") understanding of discourse.[11] This allows us to understand how it functions across different contexts – from Washington, DC to a small Ukrainian town – undergoing a number of transformations, but without losing its main characteristics. The empirical analysis presented in this book is based at

three core sites: (1) the U.S. Department of State and USAID headquarters in Washington, DC; (2) USAID Mission in Kiev[12] as well as other donors and implementing organizations, both American and Ukrainian; and (3) local NGOs – assistance recipients, especially women's organizations.

Ultimately, the analysis shows how exactly foreign assistance defines civil society, its activities, and its role and how the dominance of these definitions impacts the nature and scope of Ukrainian civil society. To quote Schudson, "the power of the story is not so much that there are limits to the number of plausible interpretations but that the interpretations we encounter are of it and not of some other story."[13] Or, as Hajer argued, power lies in creating the very terms with which politics is conducted.[14] In other words, however much discontent with the civil society assistance is expressed by different actors in different sites, their interactions are defined and structured by this discourse rather than by other concepts and meanings. Whether or not alternative ideas add up to change the dominant discourse or to render it meaningless remains to be investigated for each particular instance. As far as foreign assistance to civil society is concerned, this book remains moderately pessimistic. It demonstrates that the dominance of certain ideas and practices of support to civil society are more detrimental than positive for the development of a strong and vibrant civil society in Ukraine.

This book is organized as follows. Chapter 2 presents a number of prominent ideas about the nature and role of civil society that were developed in different socialist countries of Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union in the 1970s–1980s. I leave out well-documented definitions and theories of civil society that are discussed at length elsewhere[15] and choose to "give voice" to a number of indigenous ideas about the meanings of public sphere, individual and collective activism, and the role of civil society vis-à-vis the state that are much less known to the English-speaking public. Overall, this discussion makes clear that different theories are embedded in particular circumstances of knowledge production and have to be examined within their respective contexts: Different thinkers who work with the concept of civil society do not necessarily mean the same thing by it. In the second part of Chapter 2, I show how these particular understandings of public and private spheres had an impact on dominant patterns of gender relations and on meanings attributed to them by men and women.

In Chapter 3, I focus on the rationale and practices of democracy promotion and support to civil society in the post-Cold War era, especially with respect to the formerly communist states of Eastern

Europe and the Soviet Union. I show that when translated into policy practice, ideas about how to build democracy and to increase the role of civil society are dominated by the so-called "transition paradigm" and that this paradigm is largely responsible for significant shortcomings of civil society promotion around the world. I also look specifically at the role attributed to civil society in the context of assistance programs and argue that these have contributed to refashioning civil society debate in terms of NGO creation and support, which produced a number of side-effects and unintended consequences. What is particularly striking is that after two decades of democracy and civil society assistance to the former Soviet Union, these problematic trends persist despite their recognition not only by academics but also by practitioners themselves. In Chapter 4 I look into different forms of civic activism, especially women's activism, in Ukraine both before and after 1989 and map out some tendencies with respect to NGO development, specifically.

Chapters 5 to 7 contain my case study empirical analysis, which is based on the material I collected[16] and interviews I conducted[17] during four fieldwork trips to Washington, DC, to Kiev, and to a number of Ukrainian cities over the period from June 2002 to May 2005 as well as on other more recent primary material that I gathered through on-line research. The quotations from interviews that are provided throughout this book were selected as the most illustrative "on-the-record" statements. However, my understanding and interpretation of the complex world of assistance would have been severely hampered without the many more "off-the-record" interviews and informal exchanges I conducted throughout the whole project period. My core documentary sources include strategy papers, intermediary and final reports, requests for applications (RFA), assessments, evaluations, and fact sheets by the donors, as well as various project descriptions and publications by the NGOs. As a rule, the donors have been much more willing to share their printed materials than their recipients. Unfortunately, many smaller NGOs in Ukraine proved less prolific when it came to paper work, and in many cases also less accessible for interviews. The interactions at the local NGO level have therefore been reconstructed on the basis of more fragmented data and by drawing more on informal exchanges.

Overall, the analysis is aimed at identifying and describing the main ideas and concepts that define civil society assistance discourse. Following the "sited" understanding of discourse and meaning-making, each chapter that presents the empirical analysis correspond to one of the three most significant sites of interaction – Washington, DC (Chapter 5), Kiev (Chapter 6), and local Ukrainian NGOs (Chapter 7).

The first site of interaction in Washington, DC includes the institutional settings of donor agencies and bureaus with certain procedures and modes of operation; at the same site there are also various organizations that are involved in donors' activities either through subcontracting or through providing consultancy services, such as American NGOs, think tanks, or consultancy firms. The second site of interaction is in Kiev, the capital of Ukraine. This is the site at which actors from a variety of backgrounds interact with the goal of implementing civil society assistance programs. This variety of actors includes the donor's mission to the country, representatives of subcontractors and consultancy firms, local think tanks, and NGOs. In a way, Kiev is a point of mediation between the international and local discourses. The third site of interaction is dispersed through many local women's NGOs – recipients of assistance. None of the sites should be viewed as a uniform whole; rather each is defined by the complexity of interactions that take place within and across them.

In Chapter 8 I make a comparison among these three sites and discuss the stability and transformation of civil society assistance discourse across these three sites. Chapters 5 through 8 are structured according to three main questions, starting from the most general to the most specific: (1) what are the meanings of assistance, (2) what are the meanings of promoting civil society through assistance, and (3) what are the meanings of empowering women (through civil society and through assistance). By answering these questions, I show how the understanding of assistance as a top-down transfer of technical expertise has inspired the creation of particular forms of local civic activism (at the expense of others) and promoted a narrowly-defined and essentially disempowering practices of empowerment and capacity building of local civic actors.

Notes

[1] *Samizdat* is a Russian word for "self-published;" it is commonly used to refer to informal home-made publications of writers and essayists who were banned from being published in official state controlled publishing houses during socialism.

[2] Following Hajer, I define discourse as "an ensemble of ideas, concepts, and categories through which meaning is given to social and physical phenomena, and which is produced and reproduced through an identifiable set of practices."[2] See Maarten Hajer, *The Politics of Environmental Discourse: Ecological Modernization and the Policy Process* (Oxford: Clarendon Press,

1995), p. 44.   When forming a (seemingly) coherent whole (or a system of meaning) these ideas and concepts constitute a framework for what can be meaningfully said or done in a given context. In this sense, a discourse can become a political reality in its own right and then stand in the way of more reflexive institutional change. It is for this reason that it is vital to study how meanings are produced, function and change (or are possibly contested and subverted).

3 Most of the fieldwork was done between 2002–2005; the analysis of more recent developments (i.e., 2006–2009) is based on primary documents only.

4 I am a Ukrainian with some experience, even if limited, with foreign assistance projects in Ukraine, for which I acted at different moments in a volunteer and a member of staff capacities.

5 Even though the Yanukovich-Medvedev accord on the Sevastopol Navy Base signed into law on April 29, 2010 clearly postpones NATO prospects (at least until after 2042), Ukraine remains strategically significant as a "buffer" between East and West and an important territory along the northern Black Sea coast.

6 See for example, David Howarth, *Discourse* (Buckingham: Oxford University Press, 2000) and Maarten Hajer and Wytske Versteeg, "A Decade of Discourse Analysis of Environmental Politics: Achievement, Challenges, Perspectives," *Journal of Environmental Policy & Planning* 7, no. 3 (2005). and especially the dialogical approach as in Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), Mikhail Bakhtin, *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986). Other relevant works that define discourse and explain its operation in politics are: Michel Foucault, "The Order of Discourse," in *Untying the Text*, ed. R. Young (1971), Michael Billig, "Discursive, Rhetorical and Ideological Messages," in *Discourse Theory and Practice: A Reader*, ed. Margaret Wetherell, Stephanie Taylor, and Simeon J. Yates (London: Sage Publications, 2001), Margaret Wetherell, "Themes in Discourse Research: The Case of Diana," in *Discourse Theory and Practice*, ed. Margaret Wetherell, Stephanie Taylor, and Simeon J. Yates (London, Thousand Oaks, New Dehli: Sage Publications, 2001), Margaret Wetherell and Jonathan Potter, *Mapping the Language of Racism: Discourse and the Legitimation of Exploitation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992).

7 For a summary of the argument and a critique see Derek Edwards, Malcolm Ashmore, and Jonathan Potter, "Death and Furniture: The Rhetoric, Politics, and Theology of Bottom Line Arguments against Relativism," *History of the Human Sciences* 8, no. 2 (1995).

8 Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (London, New York: Verso, 1985), p. 108.

9 The examples are taken from USAID, "Lessons in Implementation: The NGO Story. Building Civil Society in Central and Eastern Europe and the New Independent States." USAID Bureau for Eastern Europe and Eurasia. Office of Democracy and Governance, October 1999.

10 Such a contextual vision of discourse follows the Wittgenstein's idea that utterances cannot be usefully understood outside of the practices in which they are (re)produced and transformed. In the words of Wittgenstein himself "the meaning of a word is its use in the language." This implies that the study of a

particular discourse only makes sense through the study of its use in a particular social, political and historical setting. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (Blackwell Publishers, 2001), par. 43.

    [11] In some of his work, Hajer explores possibilities of conceptualizing this dimension of discourse. His suggestion is to add a dramaturgical dimension to the analysis: Through use of such concepts as "performativity" and "performance" he conveys "the understanding that certain meanings constantly have to be reproduced, that signification must be *enacted*, and that this takes place in a particular 'setting'." See Maarten Hajer, "Rebuilding Ground Zero: The Politics of Performance," *Planning Theory & Practice* 6, no. 4 (2005): p. 448, emphasis in the original. Although I do not incorporate the dramaturgical dimension, nor do I employ concepts such as "performance", the idea of the situated "enactment" of a discourse is key to the overall approach that I develop.

    [12] In this book, I spell the name of Ukrainian capital as "Kiev" according to the convension used in the U.S., including USAID and U.S. Department of State policy documents and communications. The correct transliteration from Ukrainian is "Kyiv."

    [13] Michael Schudson, "How Culture Works: Perspectives from Media Studies on the Efficacy of Symbols," *Theory and Society* 18, no. 2 (1989): p. 157.

    [14] Hajer and Versteeg, "A Decade of Discourse Analysis of Environmental Politics: Achievement, Challenges, Perspectives," p. 181.

    [15] E. M. Wood, "The Uses and Abuses of Civil Society," *The Socialist Register* 1990, John Keane, *Global Civil Society?* (Cambridge University Press, 2003), Virginia A. Hodgkinson and Michael W. Foley, eds., *The Civil Society Reader* (Hanover and London: Tufts University, University Press of New England, 2003), Simone Chambers and W. Kimlicka, eds., *Alternative Conceptions of Civil Society* (Princeton, Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2002).

    [16] The full list of cited documents and other primary material is provided in appendix II.

    [17] The full list of interviews is provided in appendix I.