Civil Society's Legitimacy Interplay in An Unstable Institutional Context: A Historical Study of Transnational Funding to the Soviet Union/Russia

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Introduction

In an unstable world, ideas, values, and even institutions are changing at an ever-quicker pace. For nonprofits, these changes mean that what is considered legitimate at one point in time, may subsequently become illegitimate. In his classical definition, Suchman characterized legitimacy as something "desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions" (Suchman, 1995, p. 574). But what if this socially constructed system is in flux? In recent years, a normative turbulence has swept across the world, manifested in the proliferation of ideas and practices that question ideals of liberal democracy and deviate "from what should be the obvious norms of our society and the international community" (Laruelle, 2022, p. 306). In illiberal and authoritarian regimes, the rejection of liberal norms and values generates an institutional instability of its own kind: not only does it employ unpredictability as an instrument of oppression against civil society and political opponents, but it is also not stable over time.

Recent studies have chronicled how nonprofits juggle different types of legitimacy claims (Dhanani & Kennedy, 2022), and how these change as organizations progressively become more legitimate (Chowdhury et al., 2021). We also know that in contexts with liberalizing institutional change – from war to peace (Cannon & Donnelly-Cox, 2015), or from communism to democracy (Carmin & Jehlička, 2010) – nonprofits may find ways to adapt and legitimize themselves in new, more peaceful and democratic, contexts. Current research has additionally shown that in an authoritarian context, nonprofits may balance different demands through intricate legitimation efforts (Neuberger, et al. 2023). But how may legitimacy play out over time in an authoritarian context where norms are in flux?

Through a historical study of transnational funding of civil society in a dynamic political regime, this paper explores how radical normative changes may be handled and accommodated through civil society's legitimacy interplay (Baba & Brunet, 2024) looking at funders, nonprofits, and their broader organizational and institutional context (AbouAssi et al., 2021). Such an approach places nonprofits in the broader field of civil society, defined as a "space of uncoerced human association as well as the set of relational networks […] that fill this space" (Walzer, 1992, p. 1). More specifically, we are interested in how dispositional legitimation practices (Baba et al., 2021; Suchman, 1995; Vaara & Tienari, 2008) and their evaluation (Suddaby et al., 2017) shift over time as the institutional conditions for civil society change (Dacin et al., 2002; Maguire et al., 2004). To this end, we study Swedish transnational funding of cooperation projects aimed at promoting human rights in the Soviet Union/Russia over a period of thirty years (1988-2018). This empirical focus allows us to capture civil society's legitimacy interplay by looking at the dispositional legitimation of grantees and their evaluation by funders through transnational financial support, considering their interaction with (a) other organizations engaged in human rights promotion, and (b) changing institutional norms and practices regulating nonprofits specifically as well as civil society at large.

The study makes three contributions to research on civil society legitimacy. Firstly, we show how different elements of dispositional legitimation, in the form of rights and relationships, may vary to accommodate radical institutional changes. Secondly, we find a puzzling sequencing of legitimacy interplay over time, which in turn entails risks to local grantees under unstable institutional conditions. Finally, we suggest that pro-active flexibility and leniency in evaluative legitimacy conferred by transnational funders may be a way to secure safer work conditions for local grantees in contexts in institutional flux. The paper is structured as follows. We begin with a theoretical description of our conceptualization of civil society's legitimacy interplay, which frames this study. In the next step, we describe the paper's research design and the analytical process. This is followed by an empirical analysis of legitimacy interplay across five periods of a changing institutional context. Finally, the concluding discussion lays out the study's theoretical contributions as well as its limitations.

Legitimacy Interplay in Transnational Civil Society Funding

Legitimacy is a central topic in organizational research at large, and in institutional research specifically (Deephouse & Suchman, 2008). Legitimacy may be viewed as a property, a process, and a perception, where evaluation of what is legitimate is conferred by an outside evaluator (Suddaby et al., 2017). While legitimacy may thus be an audience-conferred measure, legitimation (Vaara & Tienari, 2008) here refers to the particular efforts carried out by an actor striving to be legitimate. For example, funders confer legitimacy as evaluators (perception) when they choose to fund a particular grantee, recognizing the legitimation efforts (process) of the grantee as proper and right given the norms embraced by the funder. The interplay of evaluation of legitimacy and legitimation efforts is key when nonprofits navigate the intricate demands and expectations of a range of stakeholders (Ebrahim, 2003; Najam, 1996). One of the most central aspects of this interplay of legitimacy is the relationship between nonprofits and their funders (Quinn et al., 2014; Weinryb, 2020). However, the context in which the interplay of funder-conferred legitimacy and grantees' legitimation efforts take place is not static, and what we here call the legitimacy interplay, inspired by the work of Baba and Brunet (2024) on project legitimacy, may thus change over time.

Several civil society studies chronicle change in legitimacy interplay over time in relation to the institutional context, often employing the categorization of Suchman (1995) and distinguishing between moral, cognitive, and pragmatic legitimacy, or referring to Scott's (1995) institutional pillars and looking at cultural-cognitive, normative, and regulative legitimacy. For example, in a study of grass-roots organizations, Chowdhury et al. (2021) show that pragmatic legitimacy changes over time, while moral and cognitive legitimacy is more stable. Here various forms of legitimacy facilitate organizational development while enabling the organization to stay true to its original purpose. Relatedly, in a study of annual reports of humanitarian nonprofits, Dhanani and Kennedy (2022) find that these organizations engage in normative as well as output legitimation efforts, rather than cognitive and regulative legitimation. This may be interpreted as expressions of nonprofits wanting to align with the demands of funders, both as regards what is valued as good (normative legitimacy), and how to get as much as possible for their donations (output legitimacy).

While many studies on nonprofit legitimacy indicate that legitimation may advance organizational goals, they also to a large degree assume a relatively stable context in which organizations operate (cf. Chowdhury et al., 2021; Dhanani & Kennedy, 2022), where nonprofits may incrementally gain more legitimacy over time through the legitimacy interplay. In contrast, another set of studies address a more challenging conundrum – how may organizations legitimate themselves as the institutional context in which they operate radically changes or is outright repressive? Research on this topic indicates that nonprofits may handle comprehensive institutional change by adapting and at the same time trying to maintain and legitimate their values and practices. In a study on how peacebuilding organizations legitimated their work after the 2007 power-sharing agreement in Ireland (Cannon & Donnelly-Cox, 2015), the authors find that haphazard adaptation and defensive institutional work became key for organizations as they tried to survive in a peaceful context where they were essentially no longer needed. In a paper on legitimation efforts employed by a Czech nonprofit before and after the fall of communism (Carmin & Jehlička, 2010), the authors show that legitimation efforts of organizational practices had to be altered in light of systemic institutional change, while maintaining core values, to enable organizational survival. Finally, in an article on legitimation efforts of a nonprofit working with disability rights under authoritarian institutional conditions in Egypt (Neuberger et al., 2023), the authors demonstrate that legitimacy may be achieved through balancing the notions of harmonious advocacy and protective disguise.

From these studies (Cannon & Donnelly-Cox, 2015; Carmin & Jehlička, 2010; Neuberger et al., 2023), we learn that in processes of radical institutional change and challenges, new subject positions may become legitimate (Maguire et al., 2004). In other words, the dispositional legitimacy, "the recognition of the interests, rights, or voice of an actor in a given field" (Baba et al., 2021, p. 1928), may change in a context of institutional flux. Such flux may entail everything from cultural distancing of the local regime from certain parts of civil society to the regime's attempts at outright organizational extermination (Sasaki & Baba, 2024). In an unstable institutional context (AbouAssi et al., 2021), not only what is considered legitimate matters, but also who is legitimized and what relationships they have at different points in time. Such relationships may be both to transnational donors, but also to transnational partner organizations from the country of the donor, which are often imperative in securing grants.

In cases of transnational funding, as is common in support of human rights projects, there is thus an additional layer to the legitimacy interplay; the funder and the designated partner operate in a stable liberal democracy, while the main grantee operates in a context of institutional instability, manifested in arbitrary application of norms as well as in the potential radicalization of oppression. In fact, the institutional flux in this grantee's context may be the very reason that the transnational funder evaluates the work of this grantee as legitimate and worthy of support. In other words, the volatile threat of repression in essence creates the need for the grantee's local work and forms the grantee's basis for legitimation efforts. At the same time, liberalization of the volatile context, and thus its institutional stabilization, is often the ultimate goal of the transnational grant.

Given this background, we ask: How are grantees' dispositional legitimation efforts, considering both human rights that are addressed in cooperation projects and relationship constellations formed, legitimated by a transnational Swedish funder as the repressive nature of Soviet/Russian institutions in the receiving context varies over time?

Methods

Research design

We address our research question by examining records of transnational funding for cooperation projects between the Soviet Union/Russia and Sweden during the period of 1988-2018. All studied projects were funded by a Swedish organization, initially a publicly steered philanthropic foundation and subsequently a public agency, tasked with promoting Swedish interests abroad in general, and human rights in particular.

Civil society's legitimacy interplay in an unstable institutional context is here studied as three elements:

1) dispositional legitimation efforts, operationalized as rights and relationship-based legitimation of grantees as seen in communication with their transnational funder,
2) legitimacy conferred, operationalized as evaluation of grantees by funder through financial support,

3) institutional flux, operationalized as the legal and political development in the Soviet Union/Russia.

To empirically capture these elements of civil society's legitimacy interplay we created a database of archival materials recorded by the Swedish funder, analyzing them in light of relevant political developments, local legislation, and human rights treaties. The 30-year timeframe enabled us to trace the transformation of the institutional context from Soviet totalitarianism, through liberalizing policies, to contemporary Russian authoritarianism. In comparison to the Soviet Union/Russia, we consider Sweden to be a stable liberal democracy throughout the studied period, and we therefore chose not to gather data on human rights and political development in Sweden.

Table 1. Primary data sources

Archival materials			Legal documents	
Format	*N projects*	*N pp*	*Key sources*	*N*
Paper (1988-2011)	158	3697	International conventions[a]	8
Digital (2013-2018)	35	2772	Domestic laws and executive orders[b]	8
Total	193	6469		16

Sources: [a] Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD, signed 1966, ratified 1969), International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR, 1968, 1973), International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR, 1968, 1973), Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW, 1980, 1981), Convention against Torture and Other Cruel and Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CAT, 1985, 1987), Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC, 1990, 1990) and Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD, 2008, 2012).
[b] Law "On non-profit organizations" N 7-FZ (1995), Law "On amendments to some legal acts" N 18-FZ (2005), Law "On amendments to some legal acts" N 121-FZ (2012), Law "On measures against individuals implicated in violations of basic human rights and individual freedoms" N 272-FZ (2012 with relevant amendments from 2015).

Archival materials include applications for funding, various correspondences, publications and other documents, as well as final project reports, and manifest dispositional legitimation efforts of the applicant and the result of legitimacy conferred by the funder. As predicated by the funding model, all projects involved cooperation between Soviet/Russian and Swedish actors. The main

applicant was required to be registered in Sweden and to involve at least one Soviet/Russian partner. Many documents were only available in paper format and were found by means of manual sorting of approximately 600 chronologically organized standard folders, which included all projects funded by the funder across the world over the selected period. For the later years of the study, digitized materials were accessed via the funder's archive search engine. In total, selected projects were N=193, 6469 pages (Table 1).

To capture the fluctuating institutional context of liberal and repressive development that Soviet Union/Russia underwent during the selected period, we examined key legal acts that defined the role of democratic institutions and human rights. From nine core human rights instruments (OHCHR, 2022), eight have been signed and ratified in the Soviet Union/Russia. As human rights are implemented through domestic socio-legal systems, we also included key domestic legislative acts (N=8, see Table 1). We also used secondary sources to understand the broader political development of institutional flux in which transnational cooperation projects took place. This helped us analyze the historical context and socio-cultural categories invoked in the legitimacy interplay.

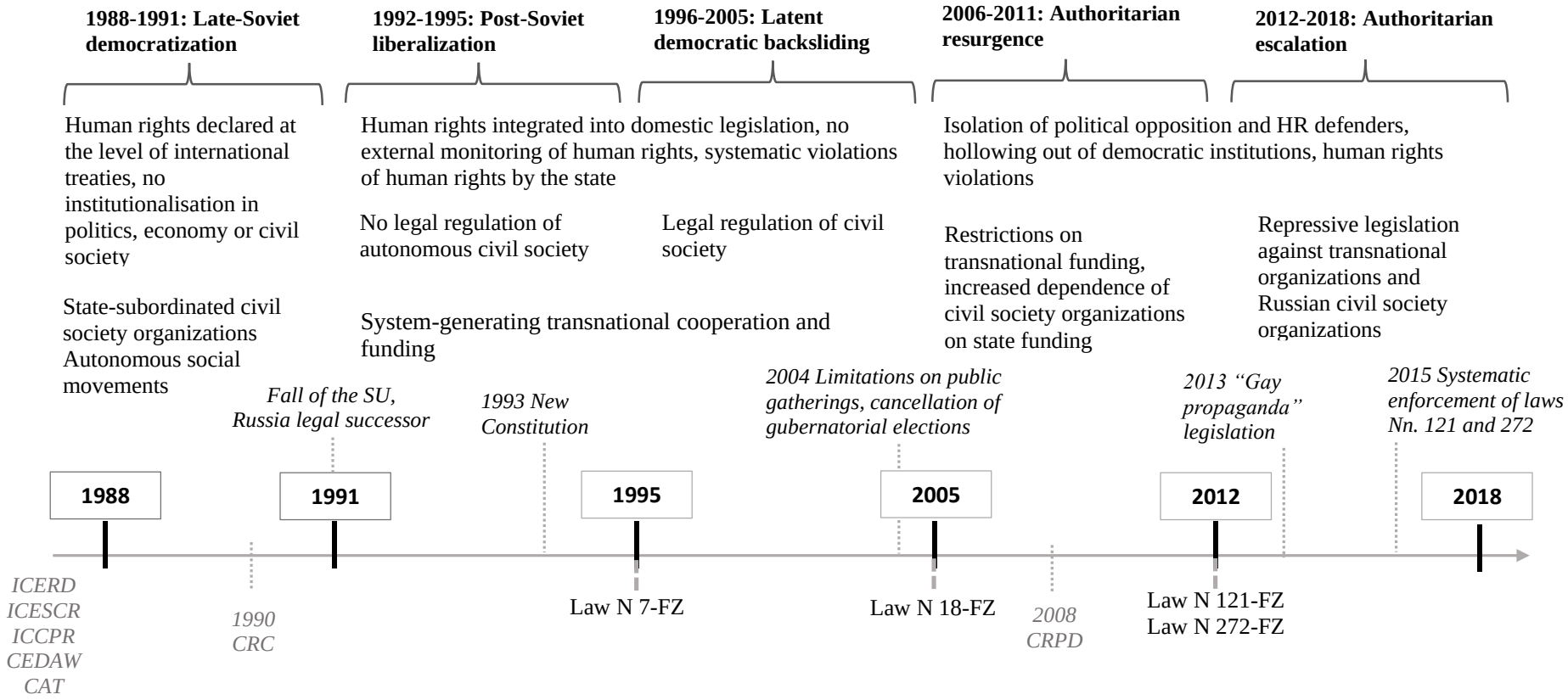
Data analysis

Data analysis was done in four consecutive stages and utilized two sorts of software: MaxQDA and SPSS. The stages are described below.

Stage 1. Creation of a historical timeline. Following a process approach, we aimed to chart a "temporal progression of activities as elements of explanations and understanding" (Langley et al., 2013, p. 1). We built our analytical strategy on earlier conceptualizations and developed a periodization of a "moderate generality" (Langley, 1999, p. 704). Mainly secondary sources were used to develop an outline of the events broadly considered to have been instrumental for the status of human rights at the international and domestic levels, followed by those that regulated civil society and conditioned transnational cooperation in the field of human rights. The pattern of "temporal bracketing" (Langley, 1999, p. 703) that generated five periods was subsequently used for organizing the archival materials (Figure 1).

Stage 2. Developing descriptive codes and moving into analytical categories. The second stage of the analysis began with the examination and reduction of archival data, followed by the development of descriptive codes. An initial data overview was created including the overall content of each project, the names of applicant and partner organizations, their countries of origin, project budget size[1], location(s) for project implementation, target group(s), and number of participants. Project aim(s), planned and carried out activities, and reported outcomes were also identified. Once these descriptive codes were in place, they were aggregated into descriptive categories, formulated in a way close to the language used in the raw data. In this process, we drew a distinction between *rights* and *relationship-based legitimation*. Rights-based legitimation referred to the types of rights embedded in the projects, and relationship-based legitimation manifested in the kind of actors involved, their relationships, and the project locations. Table 2 outlines the development of the analytical categories for rights-based legitimation and Table 3 outlines the analytical categories for relationship-based legitimation and their distribution in the sample. As seen in Table 3, following our understanding of civil society as a space for a broad set of relational networks, although nonprofits are the most dominant form, they constitute one of eight relationship categories found in transnational cooperation networks supporting human rights promotion in the Soviet Union/Russia during the selected period.

Figure 1. A timeline of the empirical context: human rights in the institutional setting, 1988-2018



Heads of State: 1985-1991 Mikhail Gorbachev, 1991-1999 Boris Yeltsin, 2000-2008 Vladimir Putin, 2008-2012 Dmitry Medvedev, 2012-2018 Vladimir Putin

Military offensives/invasions: 1994-1995, 1999-2000 in Chechnya, 2008 in Georgia, 2014-present in Ukraine

Table 2. Deriving core analytical categories for rights-based legitimation

Illustrative quote	Thematic observations	Core analytical categories	N (%)
"1996 is a crossroads year in international politics. Presidential elections are held in both Russia and the USA and in the same year the EU's major intergovernmental conference on the future development of the Union takes place. The question of how these events affect security policy developments in Europe will be at the center of the seminar…"	*Peacekeeping*	**A social and international order needed to realize rights**	51 (18)
"We represent [X in Lund, Sweden], which is an economic student association that works for international cooperation. We work for cultural and economic understanding between different countries in order to adapt to the internationalization that is taking place in the world [want to start an X association in Russia]"	*Internationalization*		
"Implementation of an inclusive approach to educational, recreational and artistic institutions and organizations […] Increased participation of people of disability in the society."	*Rights of disabled*	**Equality of rights without discrimination**	45 (15.6)
"The project stimulates young women's empowerment in industrial cities in the Russian Arctic, developing artistic and cultural exchange between Russia and Sweden. Mining cities require more male labor than female and are permeated with masculine culture. Gender inequality is rarely problematized and there are only a few initiatives supporting women and reigning questions of gender asymmetries. The project develops discussions on gender issues and stimulates art initiatives supporting women."	*Gender equality*		
"To create visibility and identification on a personal as well as structural level […] Through cooperation with a range of Russian human rights organizations and NGOs, to share the experiences of working in difficult societies."	*LGBT rights*		
"[The stated goal is to] bring to the network a concrete competence in working with children with psychosocial problems and their families."	*Children's rights*	**Other universal rights**	5 (1.7)

"[Output will be] an enhanced capacity among drivers of change and civil society to promote democracy [through] uniting young professionals as the most active part of the local community around the idea of democratic reprogramming of wooden buildings."	*Expanding cultural production*	**Participation in cultural life**	52 (18)
"The role of higher education is very important in the democratic process of the entire Russian society. It is not only because of students who traditionally are the most democratic part of the population in any country but also because of teaching staff – the highly educated people who understand that social wellbeing can come only through democratic reforms. Thus, the system of higher education is the main core for the democratic development of the whole society."	*Education as vehicle for democracy*	**Other social, economic, and cultural rights**	36 (12.5)
"The goal is to bring about knowledge and attitude changes through courses, designed as community education courses, with the aim of the participants' acquisition of expanded knowledge about older people and about people with disabilities, where the knowledge rests on a humanistic view of people."	*Democratization of healthcare*		
"The [X Technical] Workers' Union and the Russian [Y Technical] Organization agreed that two representatives from Sweden should be sent to Russia to hold a seminar for about 50 representatives of the [Y Technical] Union for three days. The topics to be included in the seminar are a review of labor law, the content of collective agreements, construction, negotiation methodology and issues related to structural changes."	*Workers' rights*	**Freedom of assembly and association**	26 (9)
"The development and survival of this sector […] depends not only on the ability of indigenous NGOs to organize and manage themselves effectively, but also on the creation of a legal and political climate that will allow them to thrive […] [and the] capacity and capability of NGOs to co-operate with governmental agencies in order to be able to address the needs of the people."	*Support for civil society (as a whole)*		
"The student organization that exists at the university in [X Russian city] has no experience of working with the safeguarding of students' interests in terms of educational monitoring [...] The purpose of the trip is to report on how student unions work in Sweden and to support [Russian students] in	*Promoting associations*		

their efforts to build an organization that works to improve students' opportunities to influence their education."			
"Improved opportunities for freedom of opinion and expression through greater access to means of cultural and artistic expression" "Through the arts and cultural activities, where opinions and expressions are presented for an audience, people are enabled to experience ideas that they haven't encountered or heard of, thus allowing them to make informed decisions on how to live or how to act as citizens."	*Expression* *Opinion*	**Freedom of opinion, expression, and the press**	26 (9)
"To show while relating to the democracy seminar how you can deal with ecological problems in companies and the local environment with democratic working methods" "The seminar aims to train students to become opinion leaders in Russia. The focus is on:1) information on the medical risks of nuclear weapons [...] 2) sharing our knowledge [from the Swedish project participant] and experience of democratic working methods and establishing contact between students."	*Environment* *Anti-nuclear activism*	**Life**	15 (5.2)
"Development towards democracy has given the Russian municipalities increased independence and increased responsibility. One of the major problems today is the lack of democratic traditions and experiences of local self-government. Many of the elected representatives lack political experience and knowledge. They therefore need help to cope with their new roles."	*Political culture of representation*	**Other civil and political rights**	31 (10.7)

Table 3. Sample overview: categories of relationship-based legitimation (% of all organizations), Number of funded projects over time (N=193)

Organizational forms	Soviet/Russian applicant	Swedish partner
nonprofit organizations	52.3	41.5
knowledge institutions	18.1	18.1
public organizations	7.8	14
cultural organizations	6.7	4.1
profit-oriented private organizations	5.2	3.1
individuals (activists)	7.8	0.5
other	2	1

N of projects/ period	**1988-1991**	**1992-1995**	**1996-2005**	**2006-2011**	**2012-2018**
	31	58	44	25	35

Table 4. Two-step clustering solution, N=156

Cluster A	**Cluster B**
Applicant*: knowledge institutions (28.3%) Partner*: nonprofit organizations (53%) Location: Soviet Union/Russia Av. budget: 126,600 SEK	Applicant: nonprofit organizations (100%) Partner: nonprofit organizations (100%) Location: Soviet Union/Russia Av. budget: 118,400 SEK
Cluster C	**Cluster D**
Applicant: nonprofit organizations (93.3%) Partner*: knowledge institutions (50%) Location: Soviet Union/Russia Av. budget: 114,700 SEK	No nonprofit organizations involved in the project Location: Sweden Av. budget: 440,500 SEK

Note: * also includes profit-oriented private organizations, the press, political organizations and individuals (<15% in each category); Applicant = Swedish organization, Partner = Soviet/Russian organization

Stage 3. Analyzing rights and relationship-based legitimation over time. Having derived analytical categories for rights and relationship-based legitimations, we analyzed each of them in the context of the historical timeline. First, the variation in rights-based legitimation was examined, using cross-tabulation and Chi-2 analysis, and focusing on the types of concepts that were used to describe human rights at different points in time, as well as the frequency of these manifestations. Subsequently, we explored relationship-based legitimations built around each project, focusing on organizational forms and the variation in transnational organizational relationships over time. The clustering method was applied to the data using categorical variables describing Swedish applicants and their Soviet/Russian partners'

organizational form, location of the project (Sweden or the Soviet Union/Russia), and the continuous variable describing budget size, as presented in Table 4. Figure 2 shows the development of rights-based legitimation over time, and in Table 5 the development of relationship-based legitimation over the same period is presented.

Figure 2. Variation in rights-based legitimation over time (references to human rights in the projects' framing), % of total N of projects per year, N= 287

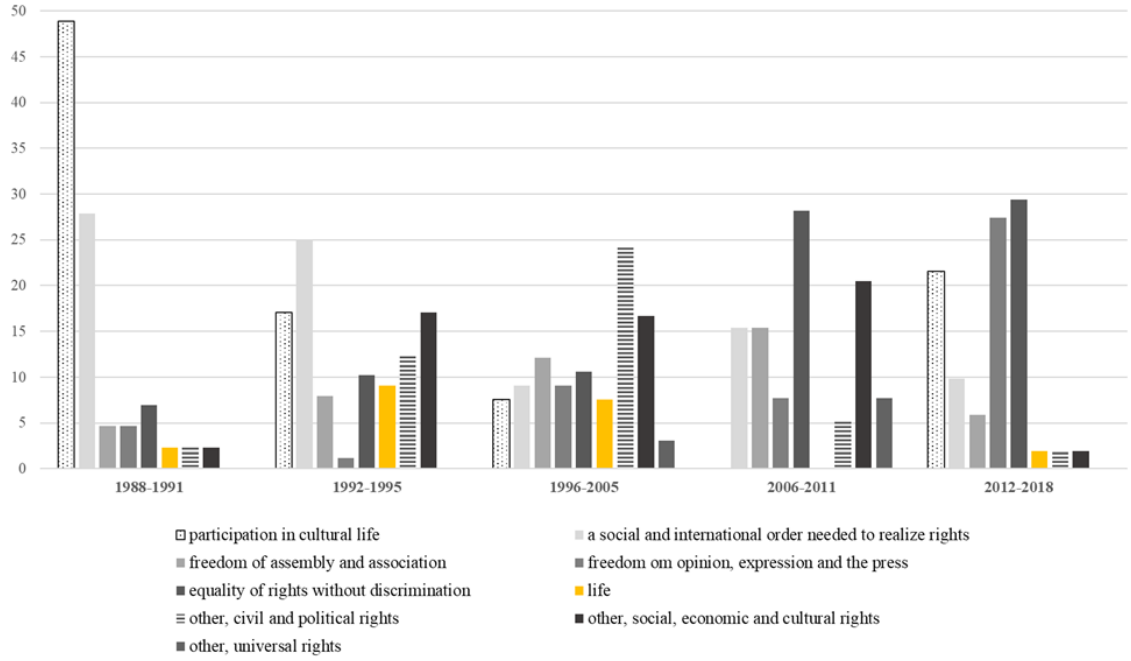


Table 5. Variation in relationship-based legitimation over time (relationship complexity, N=159, and clusters, N=156), % of total N of projects per year

	1988-1991	1992-1995	1996-2005	2006-2011	2012-2018
Relationship complexity*					
1 partner	86	69	62	33	83
2 partners	9	21	17	29	6
3 partners	5	2	7	10	6
more than 3 partners	0	8	14	29	6
Cluster					
A	43	33	34	23	37
B	43	24	21	27	49
C	5	22	31	27	9
D	10	20	14	23	6

Note: *1 applicant

Stage 4. Developing a model of legitimacy interplay under fluctuating institutional conditions. As a final step, we connected the analysis of rights and relationship-based legitimation to the temporal bracketing characteristics. At this stage, we conceptualized the institutional conditions at different periods of the historical timeline in relation to the analysis of legitimacy interplay, not only looking specifically at rights and relationship-based legitimations, but also analyzing them as a manifestation of legitimacy conferred by funder evaluation (by granting financial support at a specific point in time). This helped us identify institutional conditions as well as key events that related to the manifestation of legitimacy interplay between the transnational funder and a local grantee working in an unstable institutional context. More specifically, we identified three types of such legitimacy interplay: *pragmatic*, *idealistic*, and *recalibrated* (see Table 6). It was also revealed that while institutional changes were important to understand alterations in the nature of legitimacy interplay, these changes could not in and of themselves explain the thematic patterning we identified, specifically the emerging pattern of sequentially in period 4 and 5 (see Table 6). We present the results consecutively in the next section and discuss their implications more at length after the empirical analysis.

Table 6. Legitimacy interplay over time.

Coded periods	Institutional conditions	Type of legitimacy interplay	Themes in archival data
Institutional change: Perestroika			
1. <u>Late-Soviet democratization</u> (1988-1991)	Enabling politics	***Pragmatic legitimacy interplay***	
		Right legitimations	Few types
		Relationship legitimations	Mainly simple
Institutional change: Fall of the Soviet Union			
2. <u>Post-Soviet liberalization</u> (1992-1995)	Enabling politics	***Idealistic legitimacy interplay***	
		Right legitimations	Many of all types
		Relationship legitimations	Diverse and complex
Institutional change: Law N 7-FZ, 1995			
3. <u>Latent democratic backsliding</u> (1996-2005)	Political insecurity	***Recalibrated legitimacy interplay***	
		Right legitimations	Fewer in total but still varied
		Relationship legitimations	Slightly more complex
Institutional change: Law N 18-FZ, 2005			
4. <u>Authoritarian resurgence</u> (2006-2011)	Political insecurity	***Pragmatic legitimacy interplay***	
		Right legitimations	No major changes
		Relationship legitimations	Very complex
Institutional change: Law N 121-FZ, Law N 272-FZ, 2012			
5. <u>Authoritarian escalation</u> (2012-2018)	Political repression	***Idealistic legitimacy interplay***	
		Right legitimations	Continued expansion
		Relationship legitimations	Mainly simple

Legitimacy Interplay and Dispositional Legitimations in Institutional Flux

1988-1991: Late-Soviet democratization

Institutional conditions: Enabling politics. In the mid-1980s, as the Soviet Union entered a period of democratization and liberalization (Figure 1), *perestroika*, it was already committed to many international human rights treaties (Table 1). At the same time, all forms of formal assembly, association, and organizing lacked autonomy and true representation (Howard, 2003). Political and economic reforms, together with growing ideological pluralism, galvanized the emergence of new independent organizations that developed into a mass grass-root political movement, ideologically highly heterogeneous and encompassing all types of orientations, from national patriots to the populist rural movement called neo-*Narodniki* (Shubin, 2017). The institutional change in this period was the process of *perestroika* itself, when, after decades of authoritarian rule, the political leadership of the Soviet Union launched the policy of *glasnost'*, opening and beginning a dialogue with a wider global society.

Rights-based legitimation. Cooperation between Soviet and foreign nonprofit organizations during this period is largely unexplored in the literature, with the exception of the dissident movement (Dean, 1980; Brown, 2024). Our sample included 31 funded projects (Table 1), as shown in Figure 2, and was focused largely on the right to *participate in cultural life*. Such projects were often aimed at mutually enriching expansion of cultural production through cooperation and exchange. Joint performances and exhibitions were common activities in such projects, which brought participants' work to a broader public. Another common form of cooperation focused on improving diplomatic relations between the Soviet Union and Sweden, contributing to the promotion of a *social and international order needed to realize rights*; it, too, was carried out by cultural actors. Here, project activities promoted peace and international exchange as a means of facilitating understanding between the countries as well as transfer of best practices, mostly from Sweden to Russia. The prevalence of references to these two specific sets of human rights in the framing of projects and involvement of cultural actors suggests that under late-Soviet conditions, organizations engaged in the promotion of human rights were rarely referencing *political* rights, with the *cultural* sphere playing an important role in creating normative foundations for the democratization that was to come after the collapse of the Communist regime.

Relationship-based legitimation. In this context, organizational structures for translating human rights into practice were built on cooperation between Swedish applicants and (generally) a single Soviet partner organization (Table 5), indicating a potentially limited scope of contacts that Swedish organizations were able to obtain. Swedish knowledge institutions (often specialized in arts training) were normally cooperating with nonprofit organizations, building partnerships with associations of artists (dancers, writers), and public cultural organizations (museums, theatres) (43% of all funded projects, cluster A Table 4). Swedish nonprofit organizations usually cooperated with Soviet nonprofit organizations (43%, cluster B Table 4), those too operating in the sphere of culture and adult education. Cooperation between Swedish nonprofits and Russian knowledge institutions were rare during this period, as were applications without nonprofits' involvement (5%, cluster C and 10% cluster D respectively, Table 4). The relative simplicity of such relationships may have enabled the reaching of consensus between applicants and partners as to the interpretation of meanings of human rights.

Pragmatic legitimacy interplay. During this period of cautious hopefulness about possibilities of cooperation and human rights expansion through cultural engagement, the legitimacy interplay centered around few types of rights and simple organizational setups indicates a pragmatic legitimacy interplay, exploiting the (relatively) enabling political conditions of *perestroika* in a moderate and careful manner.

1992-1995: Post-Soviet liberalization

Institutional conditions: Enabling politics. Soon after the fall of the Soviet Union, in 1992, the political leadership of the newly established Russian Federation applied for membership in the Council of Europe. The accession process entailed new human rights commitments and their integration into domestic legislation, including the new constitution (Figure 1). It also opened the country to new levels of monitoring and new forms of international cooperation (Jordan, 2003). Nevertheless, the efficacy of these proved lacking in light of the significant human rights violations that took place during this period, especially during the first Chechen War, which began in 1994 (Cherkasov & Lokshina, 2005). In the early 1990s, the overall number of informal initiatives and formal organizations decreased, compared to the previous several years. The variety of organizational forms, however, increased with the emergence of capacity-building NGOs, human rights advocacy groups, and charity foundations staffed with paid experts, managers, and fundraisers (Howard, 2003). Whereas most of those organizations had limited resources, some enjoyed funding and other forms of assistance from foreign donors (Javeline & Lindemann-Komarova, 2010). During this period, the fall of the Soviet Union as an instance of dramatic institutional change opened the country now called the Russian Federation to the notion of a rights-based regime – in terms of reformed legislation and political structures as well as a radical increase in transnational cooperation.

Rights-based legitimation. In our sample, in the 58 funded projects during this period (Table 1), the same subset of human rights received the most attention as in the previous period, with *the right to participate in cultural life* decreasing slightly in project conceptualizations while a focus on an *international order needed to realize rights* was growing (Figure 2). As the overall number of projects grew, those promoting all other categories of human rights also increased significantly, specifically dedicated to the topics of broadly formulated *social, economic and cultural rights*, *equality of rights without discriminations*, and *the right to life.* It is noteworthy that this tendency is in line with the overall trend of human rights promotion

as a cornerstone of foreign assistance in the development of civil society, and transformation from a socialist authoritarian regime to a modern democracy in Russia (Sundstrom, 2005).

Relationship-based legitimation. The diversification of cooperation into a broader variety of human rights' issues was reflected in the growing complexity of the relationships built into the projects. Although the majority of partnerships still consisted of one applicant working together with one partner, Swedish organizations were able to increase their cooperations into networks of two and sometimes more than three Russian partners (Table 5). In addition, the data demonstrate that the types of organizations that entered those partnerships became more diverse, with Swedish nonprofit organizations starting to engage with Russian knowledge institutions and public organizations (cluster C Table 4). It is noteworthy that during this period a significant number of cooperations in the field of human rights promotion did not include nonprofits (cluster D Table 4), indicating a flourishing cross-sectoral engagement and, likely, significant competition for funding. Moreover, projects that excluded nonprofits tended to take place in Sweden, in contrast to the previous practice of bringing individual participants to Sweden for training in preparation for carrying out main project activities in the Soviet Union/Russia. Such complex and diverse networks became conduits for the development of organizational practices that integrated Russian organizations into global civil society, bridging institutional differences between Russia and the countries where the funding originated.

Idealistic legitimacy interplay. In this period of early post-Soviet liberalizations, legitimacy interplay moved from a pragmatic to an idealistic state, where legitimation proliferated across a broad range of rights and relationships, including complex relationships. This free-for-all atmosphere was enabled by the institutional change of the fall of the Soviet Union but was probably also propelled by the previous period's pragmatic legitimacy interplay, which laid the groundwork for the more ambitious, idealistic legitimacy interplay observed here.

1996-2005: Latent democratic backsliding

Institutional conditions: Political insecurity. During this period, the landscape of international funders remained diverse albeit more insecure than previously. The state of human rights in Russia during this period is somewhat under-researched by scholars (Uhlin, 2005); however, there is evidence of severe human rights violations, especially during the second offensive in Chechnya (1999-2001) (Forsberg & Herd, 2005), but also in the

penitentiary and economic systems. Civic organizing against those violations was relatively weak (Weiler, 2002). Through the increased pressure on and gradual takeover of independent media, cancellation of gubernatorial elections, and changing procedures for election to the Federal Assembly, the government further consolidated power under the office of the president (Lankina, 2009). Scholars recognize that as a result of economic deprivations, changes in social mobilization patterns took place alongside an erosion of fragile solidarity during this decade (Mishler & Rose, 1997; Narozhna, 2004). Equally important, if not more so, was the state's distrust of civic action (Evans, 2002, 2011), which prevented a rise in opportunity structures for citizens' and nonprofit organizations' involvement in politics (Jakobson & Sanovich, 2010).

During this period, the *Law N 7-FZ* from 1995 may be viewed as an instance of significant institutional change, being a first state attempt at regulating civil society. The law 1) defined the legal forms of organizations, identifying autonomous non-commercial organizations alongside state corporations, Cossack communities, and municipal institutions; 2) set conditions for their establishment, closure, management, and funding, and 3) outlined the main types of activities they were allowed to carry out. The law became the first step in defining nonprofit organizations not only as a form of self-organizing independent from the state, but also as an instrument for the realization of state interests.

Rights-based legitimation. In this somewhat sobering period, we observe in our sample that a relatively smaller number of projects per year were funded (44 in total over the entire decade, Figure 2). The decreased preoccupation of the funded projects with the topic of *a social and international order needed to realize rights* is also noteworthy. As a topic addressing general institutional norms, its presence or absence can be seen as indicative of the overall orientation towards overcoming differences between the Russian and Swedish context. The apparent reduction of projects framing their activities in terms of the internationalization of human rights promotion can be interpreted as a re-orientation from one-sided exchanges (from Sweden to Russia) towards formulations striving for change in both countries. It can also be seen as a necessary reaction to the emerging government apprehension towards international cooperation for human rights. Nevertheless, against the backdrop of latent democratic backsliding, the variety of human rights put forward in the projects is broader than in previous periods. Especially noteworthy is the preoccupation with *other socio-economic and cultural rights* in the sphere of education, healthcare and employment, *other civil and political rights*

with emphasis on expanding political participation, and the broad category of *right to life* encompassing environmental work (see Table 2 for more examples).

Relationship-based legitimation. Although the majority of projects were carried out by a Swedish applicant with only one Russian partner, the overall number of projects with complex networks of two and more partners continued to grow (Table 5). In most of those partnerships nonprofit organizations were prevalent as partners, applicants, or both (Table 4, Table 5).

Recalibrated legitimacy interplay. During this period, a growing realization took root that the democratic development of the Russian Federation was not fully following the idealized charted path of the previous period. A decrease in activity may indicate that a sense of unclarity as to the state of things was creeping into the projects, rather than an explicit change of direction. More specifically, it seems that the new institutional conditions, as manifested in the institutional change, led to a recalibration of the previously idealistic legitimacy interplay rather than a radical alteration. Interestingly, this recalibration was mainly rights-based, while the relationship constellations remained complex and included various types organizations. This is somewhat surprising as it indicates that the rights and relationship-based legitimations were not synchronized in their recalibration, but that they seem to build on the previous idealistic trajectory in divergent ways; the rights-based legitimations becoming more guarded, while relationship-based legitimations become more complex.

2006-2011: Authoritarian resurgence

Institutional conditions: Political insecurity. Most of this period was characterized by retrogressive reforms clad in liberalization rhetoric, growing state control over media, blatant election fraud, unlawful prosecution of political opponents and independent journalists (Wilson, 2015), and a full-scale military assault on Georgia (Cornell & Starr, 2009) (Figure 1). Government policies towards civil society took two main directions. On the one hand, regulatory pressures on foreign organizations as well as Russian organizations receiving foreign funding increased with strict legislation on registration and auditing (Klitsounova, 2008). On the other hand, Russian state funding was made available to nonprofit organizations via federal and regional ministries as well as specially set-up foundations, which were not transparent (Transparency International, 2014) and favored government-affiliated marionette organizations (Ljubownikow et al., 2013).

During this period of authoritarian resurgence, we identify *Law N 18-FZ* as a driver of institutional change that further cemented the political insecurity that had gradually become the new reality of civil society organizing in the Russian Federation. The law impeded the establishment and registration of new nonprofit organizations (especially if foreign citizens or entities were involved), complicated procedures and increased requirements for reporting (particularly for international organizations), and restricted conditions for receiving foreign funding.

Rights-based legitimation. Collaborations between Russian and Swedish organizations during this period remained substantial: with 25 projects during the 5 years, the number of projects per year exceeded the number of projects per year during the previous period, when 44 projects were carried out over a decade (Table 3). A significant focus remained on *equality of rights without discrimination*, often with an emphasis on preventing workplace discrimination against women and people with disabilities, as well as promoting children's rights, as a part of *other universal rights.* Thus, as if pushing back against the de-politization trend (Casula, 2013) and increased control, the largest number of projects framed their activities in terms of fostering political participation and representation on all levels, especially through local self-governance.

Relationship-based legitimation. The growing differences between Russia and Sweden notwithstanding, the data revealed a continued trend towards building complex networks of two and more partners, encompassing all four organizational clusters in almost equal proportion (Table 5). Various types of organizations thus continued to commit to cross-sector cooperation for human rights.

Pragmatic legitimacy interplay. This period could be seen as time when agile perseverance was required especially from nonprofits, and there was still variation in rights-based legitimation despite more hostile conditions. This may have manifested a will to double down on rights-based work in the face of increased difficulties and thereby try to bring about change. Another explanation may be related to a growing availability of public funding for civil society within Russia. Interestingly, relationship-based legitimations were still highly complex, even more so than before, perhaps as a way to handle the new, more restrictive conditions through variation in relationships. The pragmatic scope of the legitimations of this period can thus be seen in the rights-based legitimations, where many also specifically

showed a will to engage with political change, as well in the relationship-based legitimations, with rather complicated constellations of actors. The pragmatism of this legitimacy interplay seems to follow the trajectory of the recalibration of the previous period in this regard.

2012-2018: Authoritarian escalation

Institutional conditions: Political repression. The period of authoritarian escalation (Figure 1) started as a reaction to mass protests against election fraud in 2011-2012, a coming together of political and civil society that had not been experienced since the late 1980s (White, 2015). After crushing this wave of social mobilization, the regime swiftly moved to persecute activists through criminal courts, to recover public support through the annexation of Crimea, and to fully cement the one-party supermajority rule in the once again rigged parliamentary elections of 2016. Gradually, unsanctioned (mostly politically oppositional) gatherings became subject to punishments ranging from fines and temporary detainment to imprisonment on criminal charges (Malkova & Kudinova, 2020). Further legislation that both violated human rights and restricted organizations working to promote and monitor them was introduced during this period. The new laws on "foreign agents" (2012) and "undesirable organizations" (2015) aimed to de-politicize civil society and de-legitimize any contentious action as "foreign influence" (Flikke, 2016).

During this period of authoritarian escalation, the passing of *Law N 121-FZ* and *Law N 272-FZ,* among other legislative initiatives, were the most significant symbolic manifestations of the unfolding institutional changes indicating political repression as a context in which legitimations were to take place. The first law established the assigning of "foreign agent" status to nonprofit organizations that were engaged in broadly defined "political activity" (including advocacy, protest, opinion-making) and received funding from foreign sources (Flikke, 2016). The second law banned adoption of Russian children by American citizens and came as a response to the US visa and banking-sanctions against corrupt public officials implicated in human rights violations (specifically, Sergei Magnitsky's death) (Rouvinsky, 2020). These measures signified an escalation of symbolic violence against Russian individuals and organizations affiliated with foreign partners as well as open hostility towards international collaborations.

Rights-based legitimation. In this context, although the Swedish support remained on par with earlier periods (with 35 funded projects, Table 1), the number of collaborative projects

that focused on *freedom of assembly*, including capacity-building initiatives for other nonprofit organizations, *civil and political rights*, including the right to political participation, as well as *other universal, social, economic and cultural rights*, were substantially fewer than in previous periods (Figure 2). The overall pattern of variation in human rights addressed by the funded projects was similar to that observed during the period of late-Soviet democratization. However, contrary to the previous experience of authoritarian repression, an increased number of collaborative projects now framed their activities around *freedom of opinion, expression, and the press*. The continued growth of projects concerned with *equality of rights without discrimination* also indicated sustained dedication to the rights of women, people with disabilities and members of the LGBTQI+ community, despite the highly punitive legislation "against LGBT propaganda" enacted in 2013 (Figure 1).

Relationship-based legitimation. Under such hostile conditions, the number of projects built on complex organizational networks dropped drastically (Table 5), with most partnerships, like in the late-Soviet period, involving one Swedish applicant and one Russian partner. Partnerships between nonprofits from both countries (cluster B Table 4) were only slightly more common than other types of relationship constellations (Table 5). This was perhaps because foreign funding now became the only source of financial support for many Russian nonprofit organizations working with human rights. The remaining presence of public organizations, news media, and political organizations could be explained by the fact that they did not experience state pressure in the same way as nonprofit organizations. The majority of projects, however, were carried out in partnerships between nonprofit organizations from the two countries (cluster B Table 4, Table 5).

Idealistic legitimacy interplay. This period is characterized by what could be identified as idealistic legitimacy interplay despite outright political repression. By simplifying the relationship-based legitimations, a protective ambition can be identified that aligns with the period of cautious hopefulness at the end of Soviet rule. However, in contrast to that period, the extreme expansion in terms of rights and number of projects also demonstrates an entirely different trajectory in which rights-based legitimations once again proliferate. We thus find a resurgence of the expansion of rights-based projects, similar to the second period of expansive ambition following the fall of the Soviet Union. The main difference is that, in the later period, institutional conditions have moved from insecurity to outright repression, in opposition to the enabling political conditions of the first two periods of our study. In this

final period, we can discern a sequenced pattern emerging; institutional changes are of relevance for rights and relationship-based legitimations, but their overall civil society legitimacy interplay – in this case, idealistic – seems to not be solely framed by the repressive institutional conditions of the time.

Concluding Discussion

This paper began with a conundrum: How can civil society be legitimate in a context where democracy is in institutional flux? We approached this as a matter of civil society's legitimacy interplay between a transnational funder and grantees in an unstable institutional context, focusing on dispositional legitimation of grantees and legitimacy evaluations conferred by the funder. By addressing this conundrum while looking at transnationally funded cooperative projects in the Soviet Union/Russia over a period of thirty years, we are able to make three interrelated theoretical contributions to the literature on civil society legitimacy: 1) the components of dispositional legitimation may change over time, in different ways trying to accommodate institutional changes (in this case building cooperative projects around specific *rights* and organizing projects with specific *relationship* constellations) 2) legitimacy interplay may be sequential, despite institutional conditions sometimes involving threats and outright repression, manifested through the interplay of grantee's dispositional legitimation and funder's evaluative legitimacy, conferred through financial support 3) transnational funders may proactively choose to be flexible in their legitimacy evaluation of grantees when funding for social change in a repressive context. The study's overarching theoretical contribution thus conceptualizes the development of civil society legitimacy interplay over time (see Table 6) and we outline each element below.

Variation in dispositional legitimations

Firstly, we find that combinations of rights and relationship-based legitimations may develop differently over time as institutional conditions change (see Table 6). This finding adds nuance and depth to our understanding of not only dispositional legitimacy (Baba et al., 2021; Suchman, 1995) but dispositional *legitimation* (Vaara & Tienari, 2008) as a process (Suddaby et al., 2017) in which claims about projects engaging with what the funder confirms as legitimate aspects of human rights promotion, as well as about legitimate relationship constellations, may vary over time. The analysis demonstrates how segments of civil society, in this case primarily nonprofit organizations but also other types of actors, continue to pursue

certain rights under the threat of repression and reprisal, constituted by complicated and nuanced combinations of claims for rights and relationship-based legitimations. The identified variation in dispositional legitimations over time adds to previous research on civil society legitimacy and legitimation by moving beyond the established categorizations such as pragmatic/moral/cognitive (Suchman, 1995) or regulative/normative/cultural-cognitive (Scott, 1995). In addition, we find that by not tracing specific organizations (cf. Chowdhury et al., 2021; Dhanani & Kennedy, 2022), but rather a plethora of organizations through one funder, it is possible to widen our understanding of dispositional legitimation beyond specific grantees and their individual efforts to attract and maintain funds.

Sequencing of legitimacy interplay

Secondly, as outlined in Table 6, we find that the legitimacy interplay may vary sequentially over time (in this study it is pragmatic → idealistic → recalibrated → pragmatic → idealistic). The first three periods of the legitimacy interplay follow a progression rather similar to that demonstrated by previous research on deinstitutionalization/radical institutional change/authoritarianism, where organizations juggle different forms of legitimacy while not abandoning the greater cause in whose service they were originally created (Cannon & Donnelly-Cox, 2015; Carmin & Jehlička, 2010; Neuberger et al., 2023). However, as the selected time period is longer than these previous studies, and, importantly, chronicles an institutionally unstable context (AbouAssi et al., 2021), we are able to identify a rather puzzling sequencing of legitimacy interplay towards the later periods. More specifically, the manifestation of pragmatic and idealistic legitimacy interplay during the periods of authoritarian resurgence (2006-2011) and escalation (2012-2018) respectively is surprising given the worsened institutional conditions for civil society in Russia. We propose an interpretation of these developments based on our understanding of civil society's legitimacy interplay, looking both at dispositional legitimation efforts by grantees and legitimacy evaluation as conferred by the funder through financial support. On the one hand, the pragmatic, and especially the idealistic, legitimacy interplay at the end of our studied period may be interpreted as civil society making extraordinary exertions to stand up against the at this point very repressive regime. This is done by continuing the expansion of a range of rights-based legitimation efforts, while building relationship-based legitimations on gradually simpler constellations/interactions. On the other hand, the same phenomenon may be interpreted as the funder making civil society stand up against the regime, despite putting it at

risk, because the funder believes that these efforts are critical for enabling systemic institutional change in an authoritarian regime. In this latter scenario, a grimmer interpretation is that the legitimacy evaluation of the funder under harsh institutional conditions for civil society essentially forces grantees to engage in very risky behavior to secure funds for their operations. Most likely, the truth lies somewhere between these two scenarios, but they point to our third contribution, regarding funders' choice of how to evaluate grantees when they are potentially at risk in an institutionally unstable context (AbouAssi et al., 2021).

Conferring legitimacy for social change under the threat of repression

Finally, this study has practical implications for the legitimacy of civil society organizing under the threat of repression. In authoritarian contexts and in places where we see a closing space for civil society (Carothers & Brechenmacher, 2014), not the least where transnational funding restrictions prevail (Toepler et al., 2020), awareness of the legitimacy interplay may help funders and grantees to continue their work despite repression. This may be done through funder leniency in legitimacy evaluations, pointing to the relevance of pro-active flexibility when conferring legitimacy through monetary support, and thereby demonstrating awareness of the precariousness of grantees in authoritarian contexts. Accommodating variation in the constellations of components of dispositional legitimation (here rights and relationships) legitimized may reduce risk for grantees and ensure stability in the work of promoting human rights in the longer run.

Limitations

Our study has inherent limitations. These include the meso-level of analysis, as we study a range of projects across time rather than looking at one project in-depth. Examining only one funder may also have prevented us from capturing more nuanced developments. Finally, the case of the Soviet Union/Russia may be idiosyncratic in its outsized historical role and given its military invasion of Ukraine after the conclusion of the selected period.

Note

[1] Values for project budgets were standardized by multiplying each grant amount by the Swedish consumer price index for 2020 and dividing that figure by the consumer price index for the year of the project application.

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