

**Environmental Activism, Non-Governmental Organisations And The New Generation of Civil  
Society in Russia and China**



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## **Abstract**

This dissertation analyses the development paradigms of civil society in Russia and China, using the examples of Environmental Non-Governmental Organisations (ENGOS) and youth grassroots movements in Beijing, Moscow, Vladivostok, and Kunming. Civil society in Russia and China have experienced similar path of development over the last thirty years, and in both countries, ENGOS have been supported by Western donors in hopes of democratisation. This factor has created contention with the national governments, and both countries have recently adopted the laws restricting NGO development and limiting the engagement of foreign donors. This dissertation is situated in the context of transition and change of political landscape and examines the impact of these laws on ENGOS and civil society development in Russia and China, as well as on the future of political activism and youth. Qualitative data gathered from semi-structured interviews and participant observation is used to illustrate the effects of these changes on the first generation of ENGOS and their foreign donors, and the impact on the future of civil society - young environmental activists. Despite the consensus on the devastating state of political freedom and activism in Russia and China, this dissertation sheds light on emerging environmental movements and the new forms of activism that may be transforming the landscape for civil society in both countries. Situated in the literature on environmental movements, youth and environmental activism from geography, political science, and area studies, this dissertation challenges dominant discourses on civil society in authoritarian regimes. The results of this study not only contribute to the literature on countries in post-communist transition but also contribute to our understanding of alternative forms of environmental activism in constrained political environments.

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Prof. Lindstrom was the founder of the Model United Nations of the Russian Far East (MUNRFE). In the 1990's, in the time of turmoil, he moved from sunny California to Vladivostok being driven by his belief in the talent and potential of the Russian youth as a Peace Corps volunteer. He established one of the first youth-led NGOs in Russia in the year of 2000, which I joined in 2007. Jeff taught us how to speak English, how to think critically, and debate, but most importantly, he taught us to how dream big and to take responsibility for our own lives. He held us accountable to the highest Academic standard, even when the system would allow us to be lazy. Thanks to his inspiration, the support of Far Eastern Federal University and my MUNRFE mentors I got the skills that allowed me to come to Oxford. Unfortunately, Jeff was taken from us too soon, but his legacy lives on through his students around the world. I am honoured to be in the position to cite his Doctorate thesis on youth movements and Democracy in Russia in my present work.

I am grateful for the generous support of the Weidenfeld-Hoffmann Trust, that enabled me to conduct this work, and I am extremely lucky to be a part of 2013 cohort with such inspiring scholars who I now call my family. Alexandra Henderson and the WHT team provided me with mentorship, motivation, and love that is beyond what anyone could ever expect from a scholarship.

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## Chapter 1

### 1.1 Introduction and background

Sharing 4,300 km of geographical border and a communist past, nowadays Russia and China are close allies in political and economic arenas. The two countries, despite their differences, have common characteristics such as highly centralised government, ideas of state domination over the market, and the value given to non-transparent goals of strategic planning (Billé, Delaplace, Humphrey, 2012). Economic reforms and “opening up” in China in the 1980’s, and a rapid transition to capitalism after the Soviet Union collapse in Russia during the 1990’s has created political space for civil society and Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs).

The modern concept of civil society as a self-regulating, self-governing sphere of activities that differentiated from the state, was developed by Adam Smith and the intellectuals of the 18th century Scottish Enlightenment, and some have suggested that associations or NGOs are the key actors in civil society (Cohen and Arato, 1992; Evans 2012; Seligman, 1995; Sundstrom 2005; Trentmann, 2000). It has been argued that NGOs and strong civil society stimulate pluralism and political competence – they are foundations of democracy (Almond and Verba, 1963; Inglehart, 1997; Harbeson, 1994). Environmental Non-governmental Organisations (ENGOs) have pioneered the development of citizen activism around the same time in Russia and China - the late 1980s (Semenova 2006, Yang 2005). Challenges that Russian and Chinese NGOs face include political constraints, poor access to information, low levels of political awareness and a culture that favours bureaucratic top-down solutions to public problems and despises personal initiatives (Evans 2012, Semenova 2006, Tang et al. 2005, Yang 2005, Martens 2006, Mol and Carter 2006, Xie 2007).

In both countries ENGOs have developed close ties with the West, are led by people with international backgrounds, and are heavily dependent on Western funding, while facing censorship and constraints from their national and local governments (Calhoun and Yang, 2007; Economy, 2004; Kalland and Persoon, 1998; 21; Sun and Tysiachniouk, 2008, Semenova 2006; Weller, 2006;). Foreign influences in Chinese and Russian civil society sector today are almost impossible to ignore as foreign foundations and governments have contributed millions of dollars each year in the form of support (Spires, 2012). Although most ENGOs have to focus on non-controversial topics such as endangered species or biodiversity protection, some argue that environmental movements exist within a larger socio-cultural context and is frequently linked to other political issues

such as equal rights, democracy, liberation, and should be regarded as a form of cultural critique and are political resistance. (Kalland and Persoon, 1998; 27).

In recent years Russia and China have increasingly controlled the activities of NGOs by creating administrative hurdles and registration laws particularly designed to clamp down on the development of an independent social sphere (Hildebrandt, 2011). They have also urged organisations to limit activities and employ methods of self-censorship (Calhoun and Yang, 2007). The issue of foreign funding in Russia has created highly politically charged debates and resulted in the promulgation of the NGO Law in 2012. It obliged organisations receiving foreign aid to register as «foreign agents», made many NGO and INGOs shut down and compromised public trust in the non-governmental sector.

The main aim of this study is to assess the impact of the NGO laws on environmental movements in Russia and China, and to uncover the strategies and discourses ENGOs use to gain legitimacy and public space in ever-changing political realities. By analysing new ways and channels of activism, this study argues that the new wave of civil society is being formed in Russia and China. The concept of “lifestyle activism” is proposed to reflect this new way of engagement of young people with environmental activism. Wu Fengshi (2013) proposes that we are witnessing the beginning of the third phase of environmental activism in China, that is marked by a younger generation of social entrepreneurs and NGO leaders with considerably diverse social background and cross-sectoral networks, and McAuley (2015) describes a similar trend in Russia. I argue that both countries are witnessing the new wave of youth environmental activism, “lifestyle activism”, which is developing in semi-authoritarian contexts, balancing between communist past and capitalist present. The ways that they operate, the type of activism and environmentalism that they are promoting and the kind of future they envision is crucial to understand in order to evaluate the state of civil society in Russia and China, the countries that have been long criticised by the international observers for human rights violations, lack of transparency and democracy.

It has been acknowledged that the successful campaign won by NGOs in Russia and China were due to careful self-censorship, networks with local governments and a focus on non-controversial issues, such as natural protection, in contrast with Human rights or minority rights (Mertha, 2008, Semenova, 2006). The term “embedded activism” was coined by Peter Ho (2008) and refers to the way of how Chinese ENGO use self-censorship to navigate in constrained political space. He argues that by adopting non-critical views toward the government and encouraging learning, co-operation and participation ENGOs have been successful in bringing certain issues onto the political agenda, as well as raising public environmental awareness.

Therefore it is of crucial importance for Russian and Chinese activists to find frames that would resonate with wider population and be capable of mobilising the public. Harvey (1996:77) says that we use discourses to persuade ourselves and others to a certain way of understanding (and often acting towards) a subject matter we regard as important. The role of framing is also very important in the process of coalition building. Benita Roth (in Van Dyke and Maccamon, 2010) noted that a shared identity had been recognised as a central component of movement participation and compatible ideologies make coalitions possible.

Russian and Chinese ENGOs are working with issues that tap into official discourses and not politically contested, creating their own set of frames, called greenspeak, circulating in the green public sphere (Harre, Brockmeier and Muhlhauser, 1999, Yang and Calhoun, 2007). This green public sphere can be seen as the combination of a green discourse and a communication forum constructed by the environmental movement – a public sphere that is potentially global, heterogeneous and challenging to the “once comfortable framework of industrialist discourse” (Torgerson, 1999; 9). It can also be defined as “a public sphere of environmental discourse” where citizens and ENGOs engage in debate about environmental issues and channel their opinion to influence government policies – disseminate greenspeak, often using the Internet as a primary tool to proclaim their power and mobilise publics (Yang and Calhoun, 2007; 211). Thus Internet technologies are contributing to the formation of a “counter public sphere”, to fight hegemonic discourse (Downey and Fenton, 2003; Sima, 2011). Yang (2003; 405) proclaims that the Internet and civil society in China have experienced co-evolutionary development, energising each other in the process and forming an interdependent relationship. This study considers the extent to which the Internet plays a role alongside other coalition forming techniques and practices that youth environmentalists in Russia and China use.

The role of the Universities will also be necessary to examine. Researching environmental activism, among the educated elite is crucial to our understanding of the wider civil society and its development in Russia and China. The case studies will take anti-waste activism as an example of an issue where socialist and capitalist values overlap. The issue of waste is situated on a crossroads of politics, economics and the environment and has a potential to uncover political and economic transformations in Russia and China (Shevory, 2007). Bearing in mind that “making new out of old by mobilizing the genius of workers became the encapsulation of what socialism was about” (Gille 2007;64), and the communism legacy and population's sentiments for the «good old times» (Ishkov, 2001), it is interesting to see how young activist in Russia and China nowadays run recycling and

anti-waste campaigns, what kind of arguments they use and what is the role of INGOs in these processes.

The above describes the similarities between Russian and Chinese political climates for civil society. While acknowledging that these two countries are immense and complex and the comparison cannot be oversimplified, comparing urban ENGOs in four cities can shed the light on the parallel trends in the development of the civil society and new form of environmental activism. The research argues, while the institutions in the two countries may be very different, the forest funding and its later withdrawal has reflected on ENGOs in the similar manner. Situating the study within the global context of youth activism allows to see the parallels in the development of Russian and Chinese civil society and to possibly argue about larger trends across the world's young people. This research will introduce the concept of "post-foreign-funding" civil society and analyse these new forms of environmental activism, which I describe as "lifestyle activism" in Russia and China.

## **1.2 Academic contribution**

This Dissertation contributes to the areas of human geography and comparative area studies. It addresses the questions of civil society, institutions and NGO development by analysing and updating the concept of "embedded activism" that argued that in authoritarian and semi-authoritarian contexts environmental activism can thrive within existing laws, drawing on international legitimacy and support from foreign donors. Most theoretical works on transition suggest that successful democracy depends on a strong civil society with active voluntary associations, where NGOs are viewed as the vanguard of democratic transition (Cellarius and Staddon, 2002; Putnam, Leonardi, & Nanetti, 1993; Tocqueville, 2009). For states-in-transition, such as Russia and China, it has been suggested that by operating within the regime's constraints and adopting non-confrontational approach NGOs could lead to a strong and independent civil society and accelerate regime change (Ho 2007, Ho and Edmunds 2008, Zixue Tai, 2015). This Dissertation challenges this assumption.

Western donors have been guided by the firm belief that "more NGOs meant more democracy" and sometimes have funded projects based on their own values often without considering local needs (Sampson, 1996 p.28, Sperling, 1999). After witnessing the role that Western-sponsored civil society organisations played in large social movements authoritarian countries including Russia and

China began to view NGOs as a potential threat to their national security and adopted the laws that limited civil society (Beissinger et al, 2012). Analysing the recent legal changes allowed me to study the response of ENGO to the external political pressure and to suggest new trajectories for the development of civil society in both countries. By placing the study in the wider transition context, this research contributed to the debate on social movements theory through testing the assumption that through incremental policy changes ENGOs would manage to facilitate a democratic transition.

There have been attempts to analyse the US liberal democracy promotion in authoritarian and semi-authoritarian countries through the support of civil society and by encouraging setting up new NGOs. This research updates the previous studies and evaluates the results of such efforts from political, institutional and communicative lenses. This dissertation also expands the scope of impact of foreign donors engagement further, by including young environmental activist to be able to evaluate the effect on such support even after donor organisations have left. It also contributes to our understanding of youth in Russia and China, and how their perception of the West motivates their engagement in environmental activism. This dissertation introduces the concept of “post-foreign-funding” civil society, that could be applicable to other countries where civil society is constrained.

Finally, this dissertation contributes to the research on framing and discourses by examining the communicative strategies ENGOs and grassroots youth movements use for various stakeholders. By examining different framing strategies the first generation of ENGOs used in Russia and China, and the effect it had on civil society development, this work contributes to expanding the “embedded activism” hypothesis. This research proposes a new concept of “lifestyle activism” and explores the frames that the activists use while contrasting them to other strategies such as “embedded activism” and non-confrontation “resigned activism” suggested by other researchers. By looking at the frames that the current generation of activists uses to recruit new members and mobilise the public, this research contributes to the framing for public mobilisation literature. It adds to the body of literature on social movements theory and civil society in countries in transition. This research argues that if perspective on civil society could be shifted from “more NGOs means more Democracy”, and viewing it as an entity necessarily antagonistic to the State, we would see a different picture - the space for civil society has not been closed in Russia and China; rather, the boundaries have shifted.

### 1.3 Methodology

The purpose of this research is to uncover the processes, describe the stakeholders, tools and framing strategies for civil society mobilisation, hence descriptive qualitative and quantitative methods will be used, to suit the question and the goals of the research (Silverman, 2005). It is common to use mixed methods for social science research about young people and to combine interviews, discussions, participant observation and life histories (Mwaura, 2016; Hansen & Dalsgaard, 2008). To acquire an in-depth understanding of a social phenomenon, I needed to capture the "social meanings and ordinary activities" of informants in "naturally occurring settings" that are commonly referred to as "the field" (Brewer, 2002). Therefore several field visits to both countries have been carried out, and my knowledge of Chinese and Russian languages as well as existent networks among civil society activists allowed me to access the necessary data. Being a native Russian speaker, I started learning Chinese language in high school, and by the time of my fieldwork I could communicate and conduct interviews in Chinese.

Russia and China, while being politically and economically different represent a great opportunity to investigate the trends for civil society development and its engagement with Western donors. The choice of sites is defined by the presence of ENGOs and international donors in them, as well as sites comparability. Moscow and Beijing are the capitals and host headquarters of big international ENGOs such as WWF and many foundations supporting environmental activists, as well as the consulates that distribute grants. Vladivostok and Kunming are both considered to be biodiversity hotspots and gateways to the wild nature of the Russian Far East and Chinese Far West. Moscow State University and Far Eastern Federal Universities have been identified as highest ranked universities with student environmental groups in the capital and the farthest region of the country respectively. Beijing University and the University of Kunming have been chosen as their counterparts in China – one of the highest ranked institution in the capital, and one in the province, while environmental student movements are present in both. The research narrows the comparison to urban ENGOs and youth environmental movements around campus areas in the four cities.

Comparative case studies have been completed in all four cities, and the cases have been found on the basis of possible comparability - such as similar sizes and demographic constitution of organisations. Although many argue that one cannot generalise from a case (Castree 2005, Xie 2009), it can nevertheless serve as an illustration of a phenomenon or a hypothesis (Flyvbjerg, 2006) as it could generate prolific, detailed elaborations and understanding of variation of social phenomena (Snow and Trom 2002 in Xie 2009: 62). My contacts and experience of working with

Far Eastern Federal University in Vladivostok and Moscow State University helped to schedule an initial set of 20 interviews. Based in China for almost a year get to know and interview at least 30 activists from two different Universities. The INGOs and other organisations have been contacted on a snowballing basis and based on students' suggestions.

I have conducted several focus groups with Russian and Chinese students, that were engaged in activism. One of such groups, for example, was a screening of the controversial "Under the Dome" movie about China's air pollution with the follow-up discussion that involved not just impressions from the movie, but also the participants' views on politics and their proposals on how to solve the crisis. These focus groups contributed to forming good relationships between my self and the students and provided with valuable insight into their thinking. Similarly, participant observations have been instrumental in uncovering the work of the environmental movements.

I sampled environmental clubs from leading universities in each city with the aim to understand who were the leaders of environmental movements and how they were localising the global environmental agenda. I have also used key informant interviews to get an insight into those processes. I kept a research journal of participant observation events that included club meetings, conferences, workshops, summer schools and the projects. To research ENGOs, I combined office visits, participant observation, and open-ended interviews with analysis of secondary data from reports, websites, magazines, online and print media. I have sampled small to middle size organisation that could be defined as grassroots and that were receiving foreign grants.

Ethnography provides the ideal starting point for understanding the connection between post-socialist transformation and globalisation (Harper 2006; 20). I have conducted sets of ethnographic interviews with youth activists in both countries to record their life stories and their motivations to engage with activism. Thanks to my previous experience of working with NGOs in China and Russia I was able to gain access to the relevant networks and identify key individuals who would act as my "mentors", making me an "ethnographic apprentice" (Agar, 1996). These people would introduce me to other activists and key environmental organisations in each study location. I participated and helped organise various events, and I was able to meet young activists and to be invited to their training and study sessions. I had also subscribed to all the relevant groups on WeChat, the most popular mobile messenger app in China, and VK, the most popular social network in Russia. I also spent most of my free time "hanging out" with the subjects of my research. This participant observation strategy that allows becoming an "informant's apprentice," but also ask targeted questions (Agar, 1996; 242; Mangoldt, 2016: 64).

The ethnographic interviews have been carried out as friendly conversations, in which new elements and questions were introduced as relationships developed to assist contacts to act as informants (Spradley, 1979). I have conducted textual analyses of the interview transcription to identify illustrative quotes. Additionally, I collected information from websites, blogs, and media outlets relating to environmental activists, which helped me to follow-up and on the impact of certain campaigns I have been observing. Because I was physically present at my study sites for extended periods of time and carried out repeated visits, I had multiple opportunities to engage with my respondents and ask follow-up questions.

Managing my own research position was crucial to achieving objectivity. Researching environmental NGOs in Russia with whom I shared the same sub-cultural background, I was aware that my presence would influence the nature of our conversation. However, after an initial conversation, and my positioning as an Oxford researcher, I managed to establish a more formal rapport and to spark curiosity about my research. My contacts felt reassured by signing consent forms and learning that they would be anonymised. My position as an Oxford researcher was also interesting and useful for some contacts. In China, too, the interviewees were more willing to talk to me once they identified how I could be useful to them. Some respondents perceived me as a colleague and discussed openly their views, while others expected me to utilise my networks or knowledge to help them. I would often be asked to consult on how to get scholarships to study abroad, how to find interesting conferences or even how to get into Oxford. Even with the people I previously knew, I have observed a formal research position of the University of Oxford, by officially contacting them, requesting the interviews and giving them consent forms to sign.

It has to be noted that the issue of environmental activism has been the least politicised among other civil society areas. However, during my fieldwork several events such as the war in Ukraine and umbrella revolution in Hong Kong, have really changed the political climate, and my interviews were not as “innocent” as I planned them to be. Young people were very well aware about the political risks and would approach any political topics with great caution. I took all the possible measures to anonymise every participant and the names of their organisations, and I also made no photographs without their explicit consent. Due to the fact the issues of civil society and environmental activism have become even more sensitive since I left my fieldwork site, I took all the precautions to make my respondents unidentifiable by using as little personal details as possible, and for the same reason I decided to not use any photographs in this dissertation.

#### **1.4 Research questions**

I followed the premise that one can develop research questions from interactions with the world (Whatmore, Rose, & Pryke, 2003), and grounded the questions in the experience I had acquired from both prior experiences in Russia as an environmental ENGO leader, and a life of a student in Kunming University. As the political situation in the countries have changed significantly since I have started my research, and the impacts have already been seen when I was in the field, I have focused on tracing this change and the impacts of the loss of foreign funding. How did the laws impact civil society and how were ENGOs adapting to them? How far-reaching were the impacts of the laws? These questions provided the framework for my first paper.

This dissertation focuses on the larger question “to what extent Russian and Chinese ENGOs have been impacted by political crackdowns, how they have adapted to the new laws and what is the role of youth activism in civil society development” with the following sub-questions that are clustered as four papers:

- 1) What impact the connections with foreign donors had on ENGO development in Russia and China and how the recent political changes have affected the civil society landscape? What strategies ENGO use to continue their operation and how do they relate to the “embedded activism” framework.
- 2) What impact foreign funding and International NGOs had in young people’s environmental campaigns in Russia and China? What is the “post-foreign-funding” civil society and how is it different from the first generation of ENGOs in both countries.
- 3) To what extent do youth activists in China use Western State rhetoric in environmental campaigns? What discourses are emerging in youth environmental campaigns in China? What factors affect membership and public mobilisation?
- 4) To what extent environmental activism, supported by Western donors could be considered as a platform for creating political opposition in Russia? To what extent youth anti-waste activists cooperate with or oppose local authorities and how does this differ from the capitals to far-end regions of Russia? What frames youth activists use for public mobilisation and fundraising?

## **1.5 Outline of the thesis chapters**

The chapters are organised in the following way:

Paper 1

## **Embedded activism 2.0: reshaping the borders for civil society in Russia and China.**

Published in the Europe Asia Studies, 2017, forthcoming

This paper applies the “embedded activism” framework developed by Peter Ho to describe the way how Chinese Environmental NGOs operate to the Russian context. The second part of the papers looks at the impact of the recent NGO laws, limiting the space for civil society and assesses them in the relations to ENGO development and young people who would be the next generation of environmentalists. The arguments are illustrated with the interviews from Moscow, Vladivostok, Beijing, and Kunming.

Paper 2

## **Turning the tables for the foreign assistance in second generation environmentalism in Russia and China.**

Published in Inner Asia, 2017, Volume 19, Issue 1, pp. 157 – 182

This paper traces the development of environmental activism and the relationship between the Western donors and their eastern recipients. I argue that the second generation of environmental activists has emerged in Russia and China, and these young people are changing the power relations with the “foreign experts”. I demonstrate how these relationships play out with the case studies from Moscow and Beijing.

Paper 3

## **Student activism with Chinese characteristics.**

Submitted to the Journal of Contemporary China.

This paper looks at youth environmental activism in China. Comparing and contrasting the cases of environmental student movements from Beijing and Kunming, I describe the motivations of students to get involved with the new emerging environmental movements - the Hubs. The paper addresses motivations of young people, their contact with foreigner donors and the ways they engage

in activism. I argue that Hubs constitute a new form of environmental activism in the “post-foreign-funding” civil society as they create space for young people to express themselves through an environmental cause. The appearance of Hubs marks the transformation of environmental activism, by providing an alternative to ENGOs and university-based societies, and reflects the change of political climate towards civil society in China.

Paper 4

### **Recycling activism: environmental activism and youth movements in modern Russia**

Submitted to Russian Politics.

This chapter explores environmental student movements in Moscow and Vladivostok and how they engage in activism. I argue that the students use Soviet patterns and strategies to run environmental projects, such as recycling, but repackage them as a trendy “western” projects. The paper looks at the motivations of these students, their attitudes to politics and explores the theory of path dependence to situate this emerging environmental movement in the civil society landscape.

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## **Chapter 2 ( Paper I):**

### **Embedded activism 2.0: re-shaping the space for civil society in Russia and China**

#### **Abstract**

NGOs have been seen as an integral part of civil society and necessary for Democratic transition. It has been argued that depoliticised NGOs in China that are “embedded” in existing political structures would eventually carve out free independent niche through incremental policy changes, as they have in Russia after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Recent years, however, saw the shrinking of political and legal space for public participation, especially for foreign funded civil society organisations in both countries. This paper scopes the impact of the NGO laws on civil society in Russia and China in order to update the embedded activism hypothesis. It draws on empirical data to describe the changes and strategies that the NGOs use to adapt and how the future of the sector is perceived by the young people in both countries.

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#### **Introduction**

In 2015 civil society organisations are facing their biggest crackdown in a generation as more than 60 countries pass restrictive laws and curtail non-governmental organisations (NGO) activity<sup>1</sup>. The media spoke about the “death of civil society” the loss of freedom, while democracies and authoritarian countries from Israel to India and Russia to China have thought to increase the control of NGOs. It has been almost universally accepted that successful democracy depends on a strong civil society with active voluntary associations (Putnam, Leonardi, & Nanetti, 1993; Tocqueville, 2009). NGOs have been viewed as an integral part of civil society’s path to freedom, with environmental movements being considered the vanguard of democratic transition (Cellarius and Staddon, 2002). In the 1990s, these theories spurred Western-funded democracy-building projects in many post-socialist states, growing into a veritable industry (Henderson, 2003, p. 5; Henry 2001; McIntosh Sundstrom, 2005, p. 420). International NGOs (INGOs)

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<sup>1</sup>For the full list of countries see <https://www.theguardian.com/law/2015/aug/26/ngos-face-restrictions-laws-human-rights-generation>

and Western Embassies often provide the only support available for grassroots NGOs in authoritarian countries (Henry, 2001). Moreover, local activists themselves often turn to international activists in INGOs for help when they meet opposition to their protests and proposals from the government, the “boomerang effect” described by Keck and Sikkink (1998).

For states-in-transition, where NGOs have been experiencing turbulent dynamics since their first days in the late 1980’s, it has been suggested that by operating within the regime’s constraints and adopting non-confrontational approach NGOs could lead to a strong and independent civil society and accelerate regime change (Ho 2007, Ho and Edmunds 2008, Zixue Tai, 2015). This paper uses Russia and China as examples of countries, that have allowed foreign NGO presence at the same time, late 1980’s, and have recently cracked down on civil society, to assess the impact of these legal changes on Environmental NGOs (ENGOS) and their capacity of bringing political change.

Scholars have explored different aspects of Russia-China relations, including economic and political reforms (Burawoy, 1996; Goldman, 1980; Nolan 1995), transboundary environmental cooperation (Sun and Tysiachniouk, 2008), rural mobilisation and protest (Mamonova and Visser 2014) and many other analyses. Despite their profound socioeconomic differences Russia and China have common characteristics such as highly centralised government, ideas of state domination over the market, and the value given to non-transparent goals of strategic planning (Billé, Delaplace, Humphrey, 2012). Economic reforms and “opening up” in China in the 1980’s, and a rapid transition to capitalism after the Soviet Union collapsed in Russia during the 1990’s created political space for civil society and NGOs that are voluntary-based, not-for-profit, private and civic organisations that exhibit a minimum level of self-governance (Salamon & Anheier, 1997, pp. 33–34). More importantly, both countries have seen similar dynamics of civil society emergence and operation. Initially both Russia and China opened pathways for civil society to develop, and each in a similar way welcomed the support of international foundations that enabled NGOs to deliver social and environmental services. Subsequently, however, both States have adopted regulations reversing their political support for foreign-funded NGOs, making it harder to continue receiving grants.

This paper focuses on Environmental Non-Governmental Organisations (ENGOS) because they pioneered the development of citizen activism in both Russia and China (Semenova 2006, Yang 2005). In both countries, ENGOS developed close ties with the West, were led by people with an international education, who had been working and studying abroad, and were heavily dependent on Western funding, while also facing censorship and constraints from local governments (Calhoun

and Yang, 2007; Henry, 2001; Kalland and Persoon, 1998; Sun and Tysiachniouk, 2008; Semenova 2006; Weller, 2006). Financial support and expertise provided by the West have been for both countries' civil societies. Foreign grants best explain the cases of Beijing and Yunnan as champions of local environmental activism (Chen, 2010; Morton, 2005; Xie, 2009). The same could be said for Moscow and Vladivostok, where small and middle-sized ENGOs have been growing rapidly encouraged by Western donors (Busse Spencer, 2011; Henry, 2001; Tysiachniouk 2010). Western donors have been guided by the firm belief that "more NGOs meant more democracy" and sometimes have funded projects based on their own values often without considering local needs (Sampson, 1996 p.28, Sperling, 1999). After witnessing the role that Western-sponsored civil society organisations played in large social movements authoritarian countries including Russia and China began to view NGOs as a potential threat to their national security (Beissinger et al, 2012).

The embedded activism concept describes a broad framework of ENGO operation in China and the strategies they use to stay legitimate, such as cooperation with the government, non-controversial issue framing and building connections with the politicians in order to influence incremental change. Ho and Edmonds (2008) argue that this kind of embedded environmentalism should be regarded as a transitory phase, a changing characteristic of an emerging civil society in a semi-authoritarian environment. Civil society organisations in Russia and China have been described as "embedded" in existing political structures and often cooperate with the State, while preserving their autonomy (Ho, 2007; Edmonds and Ho, 2007; O'Brien, 1996; Lora-Wainwright, 2012; Henry, 2006; Chebankova, 2012; Mamonova and Visser 2014). Referring to the rise of environmental movements that helped to bring about the collapse of the Soviet Union, Ho and Edmonds hypothesised that through incremental changes "embedded" ENGOs can influence the Chinese authoritarian government that would lead to a more open regime.

Over the past five years, Russia and China have increased the levels of control over NGOs and adopted laws restricting foreign funding, shifting the borders of legitimate space for civil society. As a result, the boundaries and coping strategies now need to be redrawn, which also provides an opportunity to update the concept of embedded activism as well as to test it outside China. I argue that ENGOs in Russia and China face similar constraints as the result of the NGO laws and employ similar strategies to adapt. I use the concept of "embedded activism" to assess how the political space has shifted for ENGOs in the two countries and how it impacts potential employees who represent the future of the sector. I will start with an overview of foreign influence and the impact of the NGO laws on the civil society landscape in Russia and China. I will then proceed to describe the strategies the ENGOs use to adapt to them in the capitals and the peripheries of the two

countries: Moscow and Vladivostok, and Beijing and Kunming, and will conclude by considering the future of the sector, young activists, and their involvement with civil society organisations.

During 14 cumulative months of fieldwork I conducted 160 semi-structured interviews with employees and senior members of ENGOs and young people engaged in environmental activism<sup>2</sup> 2 in Vladivostok, Moscow, Kunming and Beijing. While at each study location, with its specific cultural and political contexts, activism could be defined differently, I have considered “activists” to be the people who identified themselves as such and share a strong engagement in environmental collective actions or campaigns borne out of environmental concerns of various kinds (Rootes, 1997, p. 326).

The choice of the cities was defined by the presence of ENGOs with international ties. The reasons for comparing the two capitals are obvious as these are the centres of political decision-making and financial resources, and they also host the offices of many ENGOs, international organisations and foundations. Kunming and Vladivostok have been identified on the basis of the presence of international ENGOs and their geographic similarities. Yunnan Province and the Russian Far East have attracted international foundations since the early 1990’s and, in the case of Yunnan, many NGOs first settled there and only later opened offices in Beijing. Both regions are biodiversity hotspots, and represent distant, relatively poorer provinces: the Far East of Russia and the Far West of China.

For over three years I worked in environmental education projects with Russian and Chinese NGOs, and this experience brought me a good network of contacts as well as providing me with access to international civil society seminars and capacity building workshops. I used the acquired contacts for introductions to ENGO leaders and participants in my study locations. As a part of my fieldwork, I enrolled at the local University of Kunming and was based there for the 2014-2015 academic year. This provided me with the opportunity to meet young activists and to join ENGO projects. I have also attended such high-profile relevant events as the Salzburg Global Seminar on Russian Civil Society in April 2014 and the World UNESCO Conference on Education for Sustainable Development in Japan in November 2014 which provided a rich base of contacts and gave me the legitimacy to access National and International NGOs. While during these events I had off-the-record conversations with perhaps 300 people, the greatest benefit of attending was getting access

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<sup>2</sup> I adopt the common UN definition of youth as persons between the ages of 15 to 24, see more at <http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/documents/youth/fact-sheets/youth-definition.pdf>

and introductions to people who I later interviewed. I have also taken part in local meetings and conferences announced via “green” networks in Russia and China, and conducted the participant observations there.

All interviews were open-ended, given with informed consent and lasted at least an hour, and often took place over a meal and stretched to four or five hours. Although nobody requested to be anonymised, I have changed all the names nevertheless because the topics of our discussions, although they seemed innocent at the time of my fieldwork, since become quite controversial. I analysed the interviews and followed-up some contacts with more questions. It must also be acknowledged that China and Russia are vast countries and the qualitative methods used in this study and my own positionality could have biased some responses. The findings here likely cannot be fully generalised to such diverse places and civil society organisations, but they offer an insight into how ENGOs adapt to the changing legal landscapes.

### **Civil Society and “embedded activism” in Russia and China**

While scholars still debate a universal definition of civil society, the consensus is that independence is the vital condition for its existence (Taylor, cited in Guo, 1998). In order to be “effective”, civil society and NGOs should be autonomous and independent, and the dichotomy between civil society organisations and the state, which is fundamental by Western standards of the concept, is necessary (Sundstrom, 2005; Kuhn and Wei, 2006). On this basis, civil society in Russia and China has been critiqued for the lack of such independence. However, if we follow the definition of civil society as “a space of citizen-directed collective action located between the family and the state”, we can consider all citizen groups and NGOs regardless of their formal registration status to be part of it (Henry & Sundstrom, 2006b, p. 5). Many have commented on the precarious “embedded” state of existence of Russian and Chinese civil society, and the dangers of overstepping the official discourse (Ho 2007; van Rooij 2010; Yang 2010; Lora-Wainwright et al. 2012; Wu 2013; Henry, 2001; Henderson, 2011; Hildebrandt, 2011). In order to survive, citizen groups need to use politically-correct frames, promote values that resonate with the values of the local population, not appear controversial or oppositional and, of course, to report about their activities to appropriate authorities (Fedorenko and Sun, 2015; Grano, 2012; Henry, 2001; O’Brien 2006). On this basis it has also been noted that Environmental NGOs have succeeded in thriving in this context, because nature protection can be framed as “apolitical” through the strategy of “depoliticisation of environ-

mental politics” (Ho and Edmonds, 2008). It could be argued that civil society groups in Russia and China “are as much the result of accommodations with the state as of resistance to it” (Brook & Frolic, 1997, p. 7).

The politically-contested history of environmental movements should also be acknowledged. Environmental protests went hand in hand with anti-nuclear and other politically-charged issues, and were one of the dynamic forces that helped to accelerate the collapse of the Soviet Union (Ho & Edmonds, 2008, p. 332). However, those citizen groups that appeared in the early 1990s and performed social services, for example by organising people to pick up litter, or plant trees, were viewed favourably and encouraged by governments. Green civil society in Russia and China involves arguably the most visible activist community, the largest number of grassroots NGOs, and the longest history of public policy advocacy across issue areas in the countries (Crotty and Hall, 2013; Hildebrandt, 2011; Wu, 2013). Over the years, ENGOs came up with strategies to allow themselves to develop and operate within the local realities. Ho (2007) argues that by adopting non-critical views toward the government and encouraging learning, cooperation and participation, ENGOs have been successful in bringing certain issues onto the political agenda, as well as raising public environmental awareness. Kevin O’Brien and Lianjiang Li’s work on “rightful resistance” (2006), points out that citizens appropriate the central state’s regulations and rhetoric, which allows them to complain and protest within the legal frameworks. As Anna Lora-Wainwright suggested, both these concepts – embedded activism and rightful resistance – point to a space for citizen action within the rhetoric of the Chinese Party-State (2013). As the result most ENGOs in China see their role as that of engaging in self-limited, rational bargaining with various state agencies in the long-run (Buesgen, 2008; Hildebrandt, 2011; Spires, 2011; Tang, 2008; Yang, 2005). For example, in the Nu River anti-dam case, Chinese ENGOs managed to halt the project by voicing concerns over environmental degradation, but did not raise issues of social conflicts, minorities’ rights and villagers’ relocation (Calhoun and Yang, 2007).

Crotty and Hall (2013) show that Russian ENGOs have also succeeded by partnering with government and business in a number of cases. One such example is Utrish natural reserve, where activists managed to influence a change in building plans for the 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi in order to protect wildlife. Environmental organisations also succeeded in protecting forests by encouraging logging companies to sign up to forestry certification schemes. Many scholars note the importance of working with the state and adopting self-censorship and non-controversial framing as essential strategies for ENGOs’ development; some argue that they may even be more efficient if

they collaborate (Henry, 2001; Henderson, 2011; Mamonova and Visser, 2014). Although environmental movements sometimes challenge present political regimes by “piggybacking” more controversial issues, they exist within a tiny niche of official public participation (Deng and Yang, 2013).

Thus, it could be argued that with the tightening of the political regime under President Putin, Russian activism has also become “embedded”. Though Wu Fengshi (2013) argues that grassroots activism goes beyond governmental policy, and can strive outside of legal frameworks, she nevertheless concludes that contacts in and acceptance by municipal government is crucial for most grassroots NGOs. It is argued that in authoritarian and semi-authoritarian contexts environmental activism can thrive within existing laws, drawing on international legitimacy and support from INGOs (Chen 2010, Crotty and Hall 2013, Wu 2013, Xie 2009). Embedded activism theory suggests that through these incremental changes local ENGOs with foreign support will manage to promote Democracy (Ho and Edmonds, 2008). My empirical research shows, however, that instead of growing its influence from within the system, such strategies made ENGOs unsustainable and even vulnerable to external pressures.

This strategy of embedded existence had been serving civil society sectors in both countries well, until the political situation changed and contact with the outside world became more limited. The crackdown on NGOs in Russia and China followed the Colour Revolutions and the Arab Spring movements, and solidified after the uprising in Ukraine and the Umbrella Revolution in Hong-Kong, for which foreign-sponsored foundations were blamed by Russian and Chinese politicians (Henderson, 2011; Duchatel, 2015). The reaction from the Russian and Chinese governments were very similar: to blame Western support for encouraging the protests and revolutions in neighbouring countries in order to play on nationalist sentiments and to justify tightening control. Chinese propaganda campaigns stressed the importance of national sovereignty and security and reflect both China’s growing power in the world and its growing insecurity as it faces both more “mass incidents” inside its borders and renewed territorial challenges on its periphery in places like Xinjiang, Tibet, the South China Seas and Hong Kong (ICNL, 2016). The idea of national victimhood and anti-foreign sentiments are often used by the Chinese elites to increase their legitimacy (Delman and Xiaoqing, 2010). Henderson (2011) argues that Putin’s administration has implemented a directed and legally-repressive approach towards civil society. The threat to Russia from the West was a cornerstone of the vote drive and anti-protest rhetoric of 2011. On December 7, 2011 just days after the first anti regime protest, President Putin gave a press conference in which he held Secretary of State Hillary Clinton personally responsible for encouraging the protest (Smyth & Soboleva, 2013).

Most importantly the change in attitude to NGOs is not confined to discourse and governmental statements. It has been reflected in the legal landscape, and thus changes the environment for civil society in the two countries. ‘What is the new NGO law? The sense that everyone is at the mercy of the government. The State wants to influence and control NGOs by replacing foreign sources of funding. This makes the organisations need to control themselves even more and reduces their ability to operate.’, said the head of a large Russian NGO during the Civil Society Seminar in 2014.

### **Scoping the impact of the NGO Laws in Russia and China**

The level of activity undertaken by NGOs can be determined by the access to resources, which is in turn determined by the level of philanthropy and the ability to access institutional donors (Carmin and Fagan, 2010). Although NGOs in Russia and China exist in different political regimes and economic circumstances, similar factors have inhibited their development. These are a lack of enthusiasm in public participation, and the continuing dominance of socialist cultural values in political and social institutions and thus low levels of awareness and philanthropy among the local populations (Howard, 2003, Petukhov, 2006). Facing the lack of domestic funding, most groups were forced to rely on donations from overseas (Sundstrom, 2011). Although foreign grants have supported a great number of projects in Russia and China, this foreign influence has been deemed suspicious and led to increased efforts to control civil society by political and legal means.

Foreign influences in China’s civil society sector today are almost impossible to ignore, as foreign foundations and governments have contributed millions of dollars each year in the form of support (Spires, 2011). In China Yunnan hosts the largest number of INGOs of all provinces (45), followed by Beijing (43), (Chen, 2010). In Russia, Moscow is followed by Saint-Petersburg and Vladivostok, although the exact numbers are hard to tell (Sun and Tysiachniouk, 2008). Since President Putin has been in power, there have been marked changes in the features of Russian civil society, such as the shift from ‘negligence’ to ‘vigilance’ in state-society relations (Henderson, 2003). The issue of foreign funding has created highly politically charged debates and resulted in the promulgation of the NGO law in Russia in 2006, and in Yunnan province of China in 2009. Russia then followed with another law in 2012, and China has adopted its Overseas NGO Management Bill in 2016, although the Bill was going through the consultation period at the time of writing.

Adopted on 23 July, 2012 by the Russian Duma, the Federal Law 121, "On regulation of activities of the NGOs which fulfil the functions of foreign agents"<sup>3</sup> requires that any domestic non-profit organisations which have foreign funding and "participate in political activities on the territory of the Russian Federation" register as "foreign agents". While this faced lots of direct resistance, as no organisation voluntarily signed up to this register, a 2014 amendment was passed that enabled the government to place them on the register without their permission. This again was resisted, with many organisations appealing the fines for non-compliance in the courts, but again only a few were successful (Lansky, 2014). Later in 2015 it was followed by another law on undesirable organisations. This law classifies non-governmental organisations as 'undesirables'<sup>4</sup> if they threaten the Russian State or violate the Constitution. Such organisations will be forbidden to operate in Russia, and businesses and individuals partnering with them will be fined. Non-profits associated with the West therefore carry a strong stigma of suspicion; they are seen as national traitors or even spies in the media. This has come under intense criticism, and though no groups registered themselves, the government has recently illegally searched certain headquarters, issued fines, and placed restrictions or bans on some organisations (Alexeyeva, 2013; HRW, 2015). The environmental sector, however, is legally exempt from the definition of "political activity"<sup>5</sup>.

The implementation of political reforms and execution of laws in China is very diverse and varies from province to province (Van Rooij, 2010; O'Brien, 1996). However, an overall trend towards strengthening control of NGOs, creating administrative hurdles to clamp down on the independent social sphere and to limit foreign influence can be seen on a national level (Hildebrandt, 2011). Chinese organisations are sometimes required to report international contacts to authorities and to seek approval for visits, international cooperation, foreign donations, and other engagements with the outside world. They are also discouraged from working with or receiving funding from overseas organisations which are engaged in "democracy promotion" (ICNL, 2016).

In Yunnan provincial authorities have for the most part welcomed them because of their contribution to the local economy (Spires et. al. 2014). But the province's attitude has changed in recent

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<sup>3</sup> For the full text in Russian please see <http://www.rg.ru/2012/07/23/nko-dok.html>

<sup>4</sup> For the full text of the Law in Russian please see <http://publication.pravo.gov.ru/Document/View/0001201505230001?index=0&rangeSize=1>

<sup>5</sup> Constitutional law no 10-P, on April 8, 2014, specified that environmental NGOs cannot be political, however some ENGOs have been added to the "foreign agent" list irregardless. See <http://www.rbc.ru/politics/18/03/2015/550812909a79475f79d367cc>

years as it faces the challenge of managing a growing number of international and domestic non-profits that are not registered with the Department of Civil Affairs. In December of 2009, the province issued the "Provisional Regulations on Regulating the Activities of Foreign NGOs". This was a nationally authorised pilot legislation for the Bill of 2016, and while it was intended to systematise and improve their working environment, in fact it caused many international foundations such as Ford and Oxfam to leave or relocate to Hong-Kong (Interview, Kunming, 2014).

The Law on Administration of Activities of Overseas Non-Governmental Organisations<sup>6</sup>, adopted on April 28, 2016 despite international criticism draws on the NGO law of Yunnan province and has resulted in the closure of many grass-roots organisations. It imposes restrictions on foreign NGOs and arguably reflects the Russian law concerning “foreign agents”, and makes it more complicated to receive funding from abroad. All NGOs now have to register and are supervised by the security authorities. But even before it was enacted, it was already hard to receive foreign grants and many international foundations have been forced to leave China in the last five years. From the point of view of public discourse, the recent detention of a Swedish NGO worker and his public apology on national TV for “instigating confrontations” suggest that this persecution has already begun (Dasgupta, 2016). The law will allow the Ministry of Public Security (MPS) to prohibit foreign NGOs from operating on Chinese soil if these organisations endanger China’s national security. All foreign NGOs will have to find a government sponsor, and every year, NGOs will have to obtain authorisation from the MPS by submitting a work plan and a full budget in advance. The law has specific provisions addressing what it calls “endangerment of national security” by NGOs and possible violations by them against “national morals, values and customs”, the clause open to interpretation. The European Council for foreign affairs has expressed its concerns about the evolution of the illiberal Russia-China axis opposed to Western Values, and has noted that although the Russian law was evidently an inspiration, China is taking a more cautious approach by opening it up for consultation (Duchatel, 2015).

When the NGO law was first proposed by the Russian Duma it created an outrage on social media. Observers and NGO members said that it would be a disaster for Russian civil society<sup>7</sup>. Three years later a similar reaction has greeted the Chinese version of the law, prompting global

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<sup>6</sup> See the full text here: <http://www.mps.gov.cn/n2254314/n2254409/n4904353/c5548987/content.html>

<sup>7</sup> For example see <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-32860526>

press outrage<sup>8</sup>. However, all previous attempts to control and restrain civil society in Russia and China typically focused on more controversial organisations working on Human Rights issues and Democracy promotion, while ENGOs seemed to be exempt from prosecution - a success attributed to their “embedded activism” strategy.

Elizabeth Economy argues that the Chinese government has “adopted a positive attitude toward environmental NGOs” upon the realisation that these groups “fill a critical gap in the state’s capacity to protect the environment effectively” (2005). On a global political agenda both Xi and Putin encourage voluntarism, civil activism, and praise citizen actions especially in areas such as education and nature protection. Xi is supportive of civil society and welcomes economic cooperation. However, it is also clear that such statements apply to desired organisations such as social service provision and economic and trade associations, but not necessarily to civil society actors engaged in advocacy, ethnic minority affairs, religion and other more sensitive areas (ICNL, 2016). Putin has commented several times on how important civil society is to achieve a stronger and more united Russia, and designated 2017 as the year of “ecology”<sup>9</sup>. However, on several occasions he has also spoken about a “fifth column” that is undermining the country’s security (Mickiewicz, 2014). With such mixed statements both States create a division between apolitical service providers, that are already “embedded” and lobbying organisations, that are still autonomous: the laws that are designed to control the latter will inevitably affect the whole civil society landscape, and even “embedded” ENGOs are no longer exempt from being labeled as “political” or “foreign”.

It is also claimed that more than 2,000 NGOs have been investigated since the enactment of the law in Russia (Makovetskaya, 2014). The news reported various cases of assault of NGO activists and offices. The most widely cited act of vandalism is graffiti of “foreign agent loves USA” on the wall of the Human Rights Centre Memorial building in 2012<sup>10</sup>. Cases of NGOs workers being beaten up have also been documented (Evans, 2011). Although the Russian government, as well as the Chinese, made a provision to substitute for the loss of foreign grants with national ones, their distribution remains the subject of mockery from the media. For example, in the latest funding round in 2015, while the Memorial has been awarded 3 million roubles for its History of Human

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<sup>8</sup> For example see <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/mar/30/ngos-china-fear-security-clamp-down> or <http://www.economist.com/news/china/21661819-new-draft-law-spooks-foreign-not-profit-groups-working-china-uncivil-society>

<sup>9</sup> See the Presidential Decree at <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/51142>

<sup>10</sup> For the picture and the news story please see <http://slon.ru/fast/russia/na-stene-ofisa-memoriala-poyavilas-nadpis-inostrannyagent-855137.xhtml>

Rights projects, 9 million roubles have been given to the Night Wolves bikers club (officially an NGO but often criticised for hooliganism) to organise patriotic *elki*, New Year performances in the format of shows and fairy tales that aim to teach children to be “real patriots, to become the next cosmonauts”. A considerable amount of money was allocated to Crimea-based NGOs for “patriotism promotion”. Almost no funding was left for environmental organisations<sup>11</sup>.

It is too early to draw any conclusions from the Chinese Bill, but as the pilot law has shown in Yunnan, it will become more difficult to receive foreign funding. To add to the legal hurdles, there have been online campaigns to promote national States and demolish “foreign interference”. The famous documents leaked prohibited the ‘beautification’ of the West and warned about excessive foreign contacts<sup>12</sup>. Human Rights activists have been abused and received death threats, while the Chinese propaganda machine blamed the Western-sponsored violators of “harmonious society” (Osno, 2015). “Civil society organisations are treated as spies...it will only get worse”, an ENGO worker commented. While NGOs are supposed to represent civil society, it is harder to do when society itself demonises them as a “fifth column” (Lipman, 2015). It is possible to conclude that the “embedded” way of operation has put ENGOs in a position between the state and society, but they failed to draw on support from either which made them more vulnerable to the external legal changes.

On the larger scale, the NGO laws have shaken civil society organisations in both countries, forcing many to shut down either because of political pressure due to their participation in activities that crossed the line with the local authorities, or simply due to lack of funding. Even if some organisations do not face yet considerable legal difficulties, especially when many non-profits are registered as businesses or not registered at all, the public perception of NGOs as “foreign agents” is certainly undermining their position and legitimacy as representatives of the people. This enables the government to crack down on protests, even if they are driven by pollution or environmental health concerns, arguing that they threaten national security. This is certainly an alarming consequence of the laws, allowing governments to frame every public discontent issue as “political”, closing down the freedom for collective action. Time will show how this situation will evolve, but it is nevertheless essential to clarify the political and legal changes, as they had a tremendous effect on my fieldwork and the mention of the laws came up in almost every conversation. Almost all my

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<sup>11</sup> For the full news story see: <http://kommersant.ru/doc/2873515>

<sup>12</sup> See the translation at <http://www.chinafile.com/document-9-chinafile-translation>

interviewees were aware of the laws and admitted that it made them more conscious about receiving funds or partnering with foreigners.

### **Adapting to the new reality: relocation, co-optation and cooperation**

During my fieldwork I met many frustrated ENGO leaders. Some were deeply and personally offended: “I work for this country, practically for free, you know, I could be doing a very well-paid job, but instead of saying “thank you” the society calls me a “spy”. We swallowed the tax law<sup>13</sup>, but it is hard to swallow this one!” a leader of a middle-sized Moscow ENGO said. I have also met some optimistic ENGO leaders: “Yes, we have to substitute our funding from abroad with the local funding, but the Government really supports what we are doing and they fund our activities and send our members to important international conferences, so we cannot complain”, said a leader of a Climate Change NGO in Beijing. Overall, the mood in Beijing was consistently better than in the other three study locations, which might have been because it was the only place still unaffected by the NGO law at the time.

My fieldwork in Yunnan, on the other hand, consisted of going from one closed office to another gathering stories of sorrows, rather than the successful cases of NGO engagement that I was expecting to find after so many papers described Yunnan as an ENGO hub (Yang, 2005; Ho, 2007; O’Brien 1996; Mertha 2006, Spires et. al., 2014). In the words of an ex-president of a middle-sized development NGO:

There were lots of NGOs, and many of them focused on community development, and we had a lot of financial support: Ford Foundation, Soros, etc. We had lots of partners like World Resource Institute and others. But later, in 2009, the situation has changed from the Chinese policy perspective. Five years ago if someone asked me for an NGO contact, I would give at least ten addresses - but now there is nothing. People go back to the Universities or research institutes, very few people can stay in NGOs, most of the offices are empty (Interview, Kunming, 2015).

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<sup>13</sup> 2006 Russian Law on Non-Governmental organisations obliged NGOs to pay tax on the grants they receive. As most foundations cannot sponsor foreign governments, it made it harder to fundraise.

Yunnan province has also seen many offices of international ENGOs relocating to Hong-Kong or other countries. One education group, although based in Kunming since its conception 15 years ago, is officially registered as a charity and has an office in Malaysia. The money for their awareness-raising campaigns comes from private donors in the USA, Hong-Kong, Thailand and Malaysia. Every time they seriously think about obtaining local registration in Kunming, the legal status that would allow them to have a Chinese bank account and to get access to governmental or corporate support, they conclude that the hassle outweighs the benefits (Interview, Kunming, 2014). Since the inaction of the pilot NGO law in 2009, several international NGOs such as Oxfam have had to close their offices in Yunnan, and now only operate from Hong-Kong.

Foreign-funded NGOs in Russia also sometimes find it easier to relocate their offices. A middle-sized Moscow NGO worker who had to move to Estonia said:

They have come to search our office twice already. Now, we would have to submit reports quarterly, undergo annual audit, and include "foreign agent" in all the PR materials. Of course we cannot afford this, and we will have to go where it is easier (Interview, Moscow, 2014).

However, if the offices based in Moscow could move relatively easily to the liberal, culturally similar and Russian-speaking Baltic countries, organisations based in Vladivostok have nowhere to go besides China or North Korea. Instead they are becoming institutionalised within local government and the Universities. For example, an environmental education grass-roots NGO, having worked for 3 years on American grants, in 2012 has become a part of the city administration to deliver the same projects, but under governmental support. Another environmental health group, started in 2007 with a USAID grant, now has a permanent office in the State University and along with its previous projects also has to participate in imposed events, such as mass parades and demonstrations (Interview, Vladivostok, 2014).

Some cases from Kunming also demonstrated the strategy of becoming more embedded not just due to political pressure but also due to the need to substitute the foreign grants. The head of an indigenous people's environment and development NGO in Yunnan said:

We have been supported by the Ford Foundation for 15 years, and they just withdrew their support three years ago because of some clashes with the government. It is understandable

of course, that their goal was to build an organisation that could sustain itself, so they couldn't support us forever anyway. They would always say 'oh you should go and look for other sources, you should engage with the public, collect donations', but how can we do that? No one cares about NGOs in China, so of course we couldn't substitute donor's funding. We do have some research grants from the government now, but we cannot do any advocacy with these (Interview, Kunming, 2014).

When foreign funding dried-up, ENGO leaders and their peers in many cases thought to institutionalise their work in other ways: in research institutions, Universities, or to embed it in large and prominent foreign NGOs. These strategies certainly work to keep organisations, or rather the same groups of people who have been working together for more than 10 years, afloat, and to enable them to continue to work on the same issues as before. Many of these people shift their angles from action projects to Academic research, which might have a greater potential to impact policy change, especially as it now comes out from well-regarded institutions. Yet at the same time there is nobody to replace them at the project sites.

In China it is estimated that those NGOs that have not registered their activities amount to approximately ten times those that have legally registered (CNPR, p. 29). In Russia, on the other hand, the list of NGOs also includes all educational and other non-for-profit institutions, which cannot provide us with an accurate picture of the sector in question (Henry, 2001; Henderson 2011). The increased legal requirements for formal registration and reporting therefore could not have a huge impact on the organisations that already had been avoiding registration before. However, it makes the barrier to entry for those wishing to establish an NGO much higher. Some strategies that Chinese NGOs have already been using for years to avoid excessive registration requirements, such as registering as a business instead of as charity (Ho, 2008), are becoming increasingly relevant. A former head of reforestation NGO in Yunnan:

I have a friend who has some environmental projects, who wants to register as an ENGO to receive foreign grants. I told him that he shouldn't register. It is not the best time. You need to think twice if you want to become legal, because it will lead to so many bureaucratic procedures. Better register as a business. If your donors know the situation in China, they will understand and will still sponsor you anyway (Interview, Kunming, 2015).

Interestingly, this same strategy is becoming adopted in Russia. A director of a waste-management company in Moscow:

I was trying to work as an NGO. I thought it would be easier to get grants, and I wanted to work with the Universities, to teach students to recycle, to build partnerships with schools, I could also get some grants from here or abroad. But when I started to look at all the details and risks, and you know, you cannot rely on the law, so I decided to register as a business, at least this is more straightforward and I can do essentially the same thing (Interview, Moscow, 2014).

‘If you can operate without registering, do not register! I said that a long time ago’, said a prominent Vladivostok environmentalist. ‘It is indeed harder to get funding that way, but even if you are registered, look at all these NGOs who are competing for these small grants. They are biting each other and gossip about each other and fight each other over a thousand dollars from the US Consulate - this is ridiculous!’ (Interview, Vladivostok, 2014).

It has been noted before that civil society organisations often turn against each other in a competition for “hot spot” funding (Sun and Tysiachniouk, 2007). Speaking about a Novosibirsk case, Sarah Busse Spencer describes how two women each got a grant to establish a phone hotline and refused to cooperate with each other, despite hiring the same psychologist for work on both lines. Obviously, in a short time both projects ceased to exist (Busse Spencer, 2011). China observers also noted that in some areas NGOs will fight and attack one another in order to attain one or two projects. Some NGO also have fierce internal disputes and even internal conflicts (Wang and Liu, 2009, p. 31). When funding becomes even more scarce it can be suggested that even more conflicts and internal disputes will happen, negatively impacting NGOs’ sustainability and survival in Russia and China. The funding issue may not be the most significant one, as many organisations have already managed to find alternative sources (Spires et. al.,2014). The most devastating impact of these laws is arguably that they have helped in framing INGOs as illegitimate foreign institutions and forced many organisations to spend more time on bureaucratic requirements than doing actual projects. Small and middle-sized NGOs have been impacted most as they generally opt to stay in the shadows, legally speaking.

However, some foreigners with rich experience working in Kunming were more optimistic. The Swiss head of environment and development NGO financed by France:

We have always been very careful with the papers, we have a partner - a prominent local NGO - and we have always tried to build good relationships with the government. Yes, we have to report, yes they can come to our office and check everything, but we have nothing to hide. With the new law we will have to write more reports and submit more papers, but that's OK. It will not affect us much (Interview, Kunming, 2015).

The mood in Beijing was more optimistic though. It seems that Beijing-based organisations were able to build strength from official statements praising civil society, and it was easier for them to ride the wave of political support for the green economy. Besides, environmental NGOs in Beijing have more opportunities to build good relationships with central government, and sometimes even get an appointed Chinese sponsor company. A founder of a medium-sized internationally acclaimed conservation NGO:

We do receive grants from the US, and sometimes we face problems, like we are being followed, or some of our workers are being detained, but overall it is all fine. We are launching new projects and we are rolling out massive advocacy campaigns. It is important though that we never campaign against the government, but we campaign for health, or against foreign companies that pollute our environment, never against Chinese companies... we believe that our foreign partners will find a way to continue to finance us. We have seen so many changes in the past twenty years and we have always adapted. So this time we will adapt too (Interview, Beijing, 2014).

Indeed, it is easy to conclude that the capacity of an NGO to adapt to the changing legal landscape will be crucial in its ability to survive. One might also expect that professional, well-equipped NGOs with lawyers and accountants in the office would be less impacted by the new laws than those with little capacity and fewer employees. A Moscow-based middle-sized conservation NGO founder:

It is harder and harder to bring money in legally. And it is well-known that in civil society sector the most well-paid positions are the accountant and a lawyer. We can't even pay our

staff properly, let alone offer competitive salaries to an accountant... but we cannot do without one either...I don't know what we are going to do (Moscow, 2015).

It is therefore possible to conclude that the most profound problems of ENGOs in Russia and China are insufficient funds, lack of professional staff and insufficient legal capacity. Years of embedded activism operation didn't lead to incremental policy changes and did not change the system from within. The NGO laws adopted that make it even harder to receive foreign funding and force organisations to increase expenditure on legal personnel have a negative effect for NGOs as institutions and as groups of personalities, and will lead many more middle or small-sized organisations to shift their focus towards delivering social and environmental services, to descale their operations or even to shut down. However, some organisations have found ways to adjust to the shifting borders of legitimate public space. The strategies include: office relocation, registration as a business, or unregistered operation, further "embeddedness" within state institutions, finding another sources of income or creating more accounting and legal capacity.

However, the measures to ensure legal and financial security alone will not be enough. I argue that the political impact goes further than that. It seems that the political turn against environmental activism has already happened, and that ENGOs are not immune from oppression as was the case ten years ago. Although it has been acknowledged that political protests often make use of environmental discourse (Kalland and Persoon, 1998), the increased control from central governments, larger bureaucratic requirements and loose definition of "political activity", make all small and middle-sized NGOs equally vulnerable, independently of the issues they are working on. Depoliticising of environmental politics strategy did not lead to opening up more space for civil society. While foreign funding and strong ties with the West have contributed to the success of some environmental campaigns, these very same ties now can endanger them in the domestic politics game (Weller and Hsiao in Kalland and Persoon, 1998). However what does the future hold for ENGOs in Russia and China, and who will make up that future?

### **No more fresh blood: the impact of the laws on ENGOs turnover in Russia and China**

'Youth is the future' - the slogan I have heard in almost every NGO seminar I have attended. At Salzburg seminar on Russian civil society participants noted the importance of NGOs being able to attract "fresh blood". 'All the people who could retire should retire and make the way for the new

generation - this is vital for the whole sector to develop! We must make the way for the young, but how can we recruit them to the job that is becoming so unpopular and with such a low pay?' - a leader of a large Moscow-based civil information NGO spoke (Salzburg, 2014). 'It is good for a young person to work for an NGO - you can apply what you learn. We should support students and encourage them to choose NGOs as their careers', was the advice from the head of a Yunnan ENGO that has already been dissolved (Interview, Kunming, 2015).

As was suggested by my contacts, the largest and probably most negative impact is that these laws make the whole sector look illegitimate and discourage young people from choosing to work for ENGOs. At the same time, retaining staff and the ability to attract new talent is crucial for the sector, and especially important for grass-roots organisations that almost always rely on volunteers and part-time staff (Spires et al., 2014). The situation was very different twenty years ago, when money started flowing to the crisis-torn Russian Far East and the poorer Chinese Far West and a job in an NGO was highly attractive, prompting many highly educated young people to choose this career path.

For example, Mr. He, a former head of a forest restoration ENGO based in Kunming, took a Masters in Sustainability in Thailand. When he came back to Kunming in the 1990's he decided to work for an NGO: "The work was very interesting, I could have lots of freedom, do very interesting tasks and it paid well too". He stayed with this organisation for more than ten years, and according to him they never had a dedicated program to recruit young people to the office, which ultimately had to shut down due to the "lack of resources and enthusiasm" (Interview, Kunming, 2015).

Another example is Vitaliy, a former head of a small wildlife protection ENGO in the Russian Far East that had 15 full-time staff. After his studies and military service he learned through his friends about the opportunity to establish an NGO: "there were American donors, and they were interested in preserving our wildlife at the time when nobody else cared. In the nineties it was good money too and it was very interesting work in comparison with other (often illegal) options". Vitaliy's organisation started struggling after 12 years of work due to the law that imposed taxes on non-profits, and had to close down after the first "foreign-agent" law, laying off all its 15 staff, 12 of whom had been working there since its foundation. There was also no programme to employ young people because "what kind of prospects we could offer them while we couldn't guarantee any stability for ourselves even?" (Vladivostok, 2014).

During my fieldwork I could already see how the NGO laws have started to have an impact on young people's career choices. Generally, the people of the two countries do not engage with NGOs. The Russian population is very badly informed about the non-profit sector, and between 80

and 90% of Russians do not belong to any voluntary association, with Henry (2010) showing that only 0.4% of Russians identified themselves as ‘active members’ of an environmental organisation (Crotty, 2003; Henderson, 2011; Henry, 2010). While top-down voluntarism has been rising in popularity in China since the Sichuan Earthquake, most people do not know about NGOs (Spires et.al., 2014). Working for a non-profit doesn't present itself as a career option for most students. However, even those who are already engaged in activism, have carried out projects in partnerships with ENGOs and even have interned with them are now turning their backs on this option.

Alex is a recent graduate in Law of the largest Vladivostok University. For the entire five years of his studies he has been engaged with an environment and health NGO funded by USAID. He would love to continue working with it after graduation, but he simply cannot:

I am a grown-up man now, I need to think about my business, there is no way I can afford to volunteer anymore. As a lawyer I will be happy to get a normal job and then donate some of my salary to a good cause. But I don't know where. I wish there was an NGO for adults, where we could really continue to contribute to society, but you see that Putin doesn't like it and I wouldn't like to mess with him (Interview, Vladivostok, 2014).

To his knowledge, not a single person from his cohort of 40 people in that NGO (and the following 200 that have been working for it during the past five years) continued their engagement with this or any other NGO in any way after their University graduation. I found that every person involved in activism in Vladivostok or Moscow is aware of the law, or rather the media outrage it has created, and describes it as barrier to continuing working with non-profits, or as a barrier to entry to “civil society”. While other factors, such as stability, predictability of income and prestige have also been named as important factors in influencing a career decision, the NGO law makes it almost impossible to create new organisations for even those people who are the most motivated and qualified.

Maria is 28 years old, was born in Moscow and became interested in Climate Change when she was 14. Her school geography teacher suggested to her class that it participate in a movie competition that was supported by a European Union foundation in Moscow. Maria's movie won, and her team was invited to present it in Brussels. She became very inspired by that topic and decided to make a career in an ENGO. Since then she has studied in Moscow State University, become involved with numerous projects on waste reduction and climate change and has written a

dissertation on a related subject. She was then offered an internship in an ENGO in Brussels, which she competed but she could not stay on because of visa complications. Since coming back to Moscow she has worked in two biggest ENGOs there: “I did learn a lot, but I do not believe that this is effective. I spent more time shuffling papers than doing real things. We have very little money, many tasks to do and not enough capacity to follow-up” (Interview, Moscow, 2015). Maria has an excellent education and a desire to contribute to the development of civil society in Russia and to use the skills she learned in Europe. And even though she is a founder of the largest youth environmental health network in Europe, she has been struggling to establish a branch in Moscow:

With all these laws I do not understand what I have to do anymore. It is confusing and frightening. First, I will need to make sure that I have a very good accountant and a lawyer, but where on earth will I get the money from to pay them? Then I will need to apply for grants, but all the Kremlin grants are corrupt, and if I get the money from Europe, which I can, I will then need to put the “foreign agent” logo on everything I do. In the end, everything is possible, but I am scared of the future implications. I am planning to live in Moscow, and in ten years’ time I have no idea what influence the “foreign agent” label I put on myself will have (Interview, Moscow, 2015).

Yulia has been running an award-winning Vladivostok youth-led environmental group since 2008. The organisation was operating on a voluntary basis with modest project grants that came in equal parts from the US Consulate and Vladivostok City Administration. Upon graduation from University, Yulia tried to register the group so that she would be able to have a salary, but the Ministry of Justice rejected her application. She now works in a National Park instead. She says that it would be pointless to look for an NGO, because ‘you never know what regulation will come next, and if you are young it is not good to start off a career in something that can later become illegal’ (Interview, Vladivostok, 2014).

These are just a few voices, but they reflect the general mood and fear of uncertainty of 30 environmental activists I interviewed in Moscow and another 30 in Vladivostok. All of them have experience of running grass-roots environmental projects and are seeking to have a positive impact on society and the environment, and express the desire to contributing to the change in their careers. They wish to have an “NGO for adults” - an organisation with a good and “serious” reputation and an appropriate salary to match their qualifications. None of them, however, is considering an NGO career as a viable option because it’s ‘too complicated’, ‘too many papers’, but mostly because

young people are alarmed by the worrisome trends in Russian politics and do not want to become associated with the “foreign agent” brand.

Not a single student already engaged in activism out of 30 I interviewed in Kunming considered working for a with an NGO either. Lili is a third year English major student in one of the top universities in Yunnan. She has been working for a student volunteer organisation for three years. Her main project is caring for people with leprosy, which involves going to remote villages where such people have been resettled by the government and talking to them as well as doing some manual jobs. She and her friends often travel to these villages during the holidays, and they also go to other places in the province to provide volunteer teaching for farmers’ children and to learn about sustainable agriculture. While Lili enjoys these projects and thinks that they are very important she has never considered partnering with NGOs to enlarge or sustain them and is looking for a “real” job after graduation:

- I think I will work in tourism or in a big company. I don't know any NGOs, and I don't think you can get any money from doing what I was doing.
- But have you tried fundraising, have you looked for NGOs or foundations?
- No, why? We don't need money. You know, my friends and I just pay for train tickets, and these are cheap. When we are in the village we just eat with the villagers, so we also don't need money. What is the point of bothering with all the papers and reports, and I don't know what else? I don't know what to do, with whom to talk, and what if I make a mistake? What if I take some obligations, some money and am not able to deliver? Then it is better not to take any money then at all (Interview, Kunming, 2015).

All the young people I interviewed in Kunming consider engagement with ENGOs as a hobby or extra-curricular activity. The Yunnan NGO law was adopted even before they went to University, so when they started to take part in ENGO projects or run their own, the civil society sector had already been struggling with fundraising. Therefore, it is possible to conclude that the law has also created a perception that working for an ENGO will only create bureaucratic troubles and won't bring any money. This is not a career that can be taken “seriously”.

Awareness about ENGOs in Beijing is generally higher, and the presence of “green” messages and NGO-sponsored media campaigns is easily recognisable in the public sphere- WWF's pandas are everywhere. Students from Beijing top and second tier universities actively engage in environmental projects and run NGO-sponsored campaigns, such as animal welfare, waste man-

agement and sustainable lifestyle changes. However, only 4 out of 30 environmental activists planned to stay on in their organisations after graduation.

Lin is an English Literature student in one of the top universities and she is running a non-profit that helps to connect students and established ENGOs in Beijing. She believes that changing one's lifestyle to a more environmentally-friendly one is very important, and she advocates for it on campus. She also arranges work-placements for students in ENGO offices and tries to make links for projects between them. She herself is not considering a career in an NGO, because it is 'not serious and cannot provide stability: today the job is here, but tomorrow it's gone' (Interview, Beijing, 2015). Most of the young people I interviewed across the two countries were conscious of the unstable nature of NGO work. In Russia and in China, most ENGOs rely on grants and do not have strong financial support from the local population. Living from "one grant to another" was not an attractive option for the top University graduates, and even the most devoted of them acknowledged that with the new NGO laws even getting these grants will become harder and harder.

Many educated and motivated young people did not wait for existing NGOs to come to them, but instead created their own projects and organisations. These people have been driven by passion and values, and maybe because their university time has coincided with the years of rapid economic growth in Russia and China, they were not concerned about money. However, upon their transition to "adulthood", which for most of them means graduation from the university, the majority is looking for jobs elsewhere, and has no plans to get involved, either with established NGOs or in creating their own. They do not see a job in the non-profit sector as a serious, fairly paid and stable option. In addition to that, Chinese contacts mentioned family pressure and the need to earn money as reasons to look for careers in the private sector; for Russian contacts, the fear of being associated with a "foreign agent" brand has been mentioned in addition to all of the above. "Without this pool of supportive human talent and resources, the grass-roots NGO community would not be able to survive long under China's restrictive political conditions" - a statement that I would argue also applies to Russia (Spires et.al, 2014). There are indeed many factors that affect the career choices of young people, and they are beyond the scope of this study, but the interviews with established ENGOs showed that they out of fear to be seen as controversial failed to recruit large public support base and did not build inter-generational bridges. Young people who would otherwise be most likely to work in the civil society sector have given up this idea partly due to the recent political and legal changes which will have long lasting negative consequences for the sector.

## **Conclusion**

ENGOS have pioneered the development of civil society in Russia and China because, in the wake of liberal and market reforms, the governments viewed them as service providers that brought foreign investments and were politically harmless. Russian and Chinese activists have been persistently de-politicising environmental projects, and the “embedded activism” strategy has been moderately successful for almost twenty years in opening windows of opportunities for incremental policy changes. It has been argued that this strategy will eventually lead to democratisation and stronger and more independent civil society. However, as this study shows, small and medium sized ENGOS appeared to be more vulnerable to external changes, and most importantly they failed to make connections to the next generation of activists. With the adoption of the new NGO laws and increased control of foreign-funded organisations, their strategies had to be redrawn, and they had to become even more embedded. The traditional distinction between “service” and “lobby” that helped organisations in Russia and China to apply self-censorship is becoming more blurred, and even traditionally immune environmental organisations find themselves threatened.

On the other hand, the ENGOS that have already succeeded in cooperating with the governments in Moscow, Beijing, Vladivostok and Kunming, and have developed a considerable media presence, are praised and acknowledged at national levels and both governments seem to be publicly encouraging environmentalism. Thus if perspective on civil society could be shifted from “more NGOs means more Democracy”, and viewing it as an entity necessarily antagonistic to the State, we would see a different picture - the space for civil society has not been closed in Russia and China; rather, the boundaries have shifted. The new conditions for “embedded activism 2.0” push the existing ENGOS to search for new strategies to minimise or prevent the impacts of the NGO laws. The strategies that they are already using include office closure or relocation, re-registration as a business, avoiding registration for as long as possible, institutionalisation within the State structures, replacing foreign funding with domestic sources, and growing or attracting legal capacity.

Although, at the time of the my fieldwork the law has not yet been enacted in Beijing, small and medium-size organisations in all the study locations are the ones that are impacted most by their connections with the outside world and the history of foreign grants. Insufficient funding is the most cited problem of civil society organisations in both countries and it is not uncommon for ENGOS to compete over scarce resources and to fall apart over personal conflicts between or within the organisations. While it is hard to evaluate the real impact of the laws on the Russian and Chinese non-profit landscape now, it is certain to discourage young people from connecting their careers with the sector, thereby depriving it of its future. This is a long-lasting consequence, and due

to the closed nature and low levels of public engagement of ENGOs in Russia and China, it may prove to be the hardest one to address. This raises questions about the sustainability of the sector and sets the barriers to entry for new NGOs even higher. It would be interesting to test the embedded activism concept and the impacts of NGO laws in other countries, and assess how the space for civil society has shifted and how the sector is perceived by young people.

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## **Chapter 3 ( Paper II)**

### **Turning the tables on foreign assistance in second generation environmentalism in Russia and China**

#### **Abstract**

Civil society and environmental NGOs in Russia and China have been facing gradual crack-downs from the governments for the past decade and have been accused for being connected to foreign governments . Due to the changes in political and legal environments and the rise of the new generation of activists, the civil society landscape has been transformed in both countries. Drawing on a 14-months long fieldwork, this paper aims to provide an updated account of environmental activism in Russia and China - the post-foreign-funding civil society. It focuses on grass-roots NGOs and their relationships with their foreign donors and the consequences of foreign grants withdrawal. The paper aims to understand how foreign support has shaped the image of environmental activism for the generation born shortly after the collapse of the Soviet Union, and the crackdown on the students' protests in Tiananmen Square. It argues that young activists in Russia and China see environmentalism as something "foreign", which also makes it attractive to take part in. The paper suggests that while in some cases foreign funding and international linkages may have endangered existing NGOs in Russia and China, the opportunity to meet foreigners attracts younger generation to join environmental movements.

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#### **Introduction**

Having taken different development trajectories after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia and China still share the longest border between two states and have common characteristics such as highly centralised government, ideas of state domination over the market, and the value given to non-transparent goals of strategic planning (Billé, Delaplace, Humphrey, 2012). Environmental problems are complex and severe in both countries, and the third sector, Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), have played an important role in advocating for environmental causes and won some impressive campaigns, such anti-dams protests in Yunnan, and Khimki forest protection

campaign near Moscow<sup>14</sup> (Crotty and Hall 2013; Mertha, 2008; Lora-Wainwright, 2013). However, the latest political and legal crackdowns from Russian and Chinese governments have limited their impact and made it harder to accept funding from abroad while strengthening the control and reporting requirements (Spires, 2014; Lipman, 2015). Both countries also share the challenges that hinder the development of civil society, such as Soviet legacy and nostalgia for the past, combined with an absence of trust in new democratic structures (Crotty, 2009; Marshall, 1980; Shlapentokh, 2006;). This paper takes a comparative angle on grassroots environmental organisations in Russia and China, because they appeared around the same time, were supported by overseas grants, and are undergoing a period of change due to the enforced withdrawal of foreign support. I trace the shift in donor-recipient relationship and the emergence of new, youth-led environmental moments in both countries.

Environmental movements should be considered the vanguard of democratic transition around the world (Cellarius and Staddon, 2002). Scholars have noted that environmental movements in Russia and China represent the most ‘promising agent of civil society development’ and regard highly their impact on the development of civil society in general (Henry 2001, p. 2). Grassroots environmental movements, as described by Escobar (1998; 388), as «historical subjects struggling for the reappropriation of their natures and the redefinition of their identities», are central to understanding the first generation of civil society in Russia and China. While at each study location, with its specific cultural and political contexts, activism could be defined differently, I considered “activists” to be those people who identified themselves as such and who shared a strong engagement in environmental collective actions or campaigns borne out of environmental concerns of various kinds (Rootes, 1997:p. 326).

In Asia, environmental campaigns cannot be understood in terms of environmental issues alone. According to Kalland and Persoon (1998;1), they should, to a greater degree even than in the West, be regarded as a form of cultural critique and are frequently forms of political resistance in situations which make open political statements risky, the statement that can also be applied to Russia. Environmental movements thus exists within a broader socio-cultural contexts and are frequently linked to other political issues such as equal rights, democracy, liberation, nationalistic sentiments and so forth (Kalland and Persoon, 1998; 27).

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<sup>14</sup> Although the success of these campaigns is arguable, as in the long-run the governmental construction plans still went ahead in most cases, at the time from the the activists’s point of view the campaigns succeeded to bring the projects to a temporal halt, starting public debate.

If civil society is understood as "a web of autonomous associations independent of the state, which bind citizens together in matters of common concern, and by their existence or actions could have an effect on public policy" (Taylor, 1990: 96), then it can be suggested that associations or Non-Governmental Organisations are the key players in it (Sundstrom 2005, Evans 2012, Cohen and Arato, 1994; Seligman, 1995; Trentmann, 2000). As the promotion of democracy was "the moral duty of the United States of America", this was also partly exercised by promoting civil society and building grass-roots organisations in the Third World (Escobar, 2001; 29). However the results of such interventions have rarely led to desired outcomes, and local organisations have found themselves in a precarious position between national governments and international donors (Zoccatelli, 2016). This paper focuses on the recipients of such funding, Russian and Chinese grassroots environmental organisations, and the transformation of environmental activism driven by political and economic changes, young people and the Internet.

While some relief charities such as the Red Cross have a long history of presence in Russia and China, it is customary to attribute the development of civil society to the emergence of NGOs, starting from the collapse of the Soviet Union and the Economic Reforms in the late 1980s and early 1990s in China (Crotty, 2009; Wu, 2013). The first grass-roots environmental NGOs (ENGOS) supported by western donors started to appear in Russia and China, and the offices of international organisations (such as WWF and Greenpeace) opened in the capitals - Moscow and Beijing, and other places such as biodiversity hotspots around Vladivostok and Kunming. Environmental organisations received generous support from western foundations and nature protection was seen by the governments as a politically-safe topic (Sun and Tysiachniouk in Ho and Edmonds, 2008). While environmental protesters have played a role in dismantling the Soviet Union, in today's Russia or China, ENGOS are not considered to be political, and activities carried out by nature protection organisations as long as they do not cause contention, are by and to a large tolerated (Fu, 2016; Harper, 2006; Henry, 2006; Johnson, 2013).

The development of civil society organisations has been deemed by western commentators as unsuccessful as the increase in the numbers of NGOs did not lead to the rule of Law and institutional development and democratic changes in China and Russia (Cook & Vinogradova, 2006; Crotty, 2009; Henry, 2006). It has to be noted that the values propagated by ENGOS in Russia and China were often foreign and did not match the local cultures and expectations, as the global discourses of sustainability and climate change didn't always resonate with local concerns of pollution and waste. Escobar critiques the international development discourse as it is governed by the same

principles as colonial context by producing the knowledge and exercising power over the Third World and being a top-down, ethnocentric, and technocratic approach, which treated people and cultures as statistical figures in the charts of “progress” (Escobar, 2001:44). Western-style environmentalism, sustainable development, climate change and other frames were not conducive to building horizontal networks or winning widespread support. One reason identified was that they typically advocated for unattractive foreign concepts, which did not resonate with public (Crotty 2003; Chen, 2010; Fleay, 2012; Sundstrom 2005, Cook & Vinogradova 2006; Henry, 2006). However, if those values were foreign and did not succeed in mobilising the people right after the collapse of the Soviet Union, they became more attractive to the succeeding generations.

As each generation comes into a new individual contact with the historical-social process, a “fresh contact” with the world (Mannheim in Altbach and Laufer, 1972), the millennials, those aged 18 and under in the year 2000, who are ready to take over ENGO management in Russia and China, must have a different vision for the future and use different strategies from the previous one (Howe and Strauss, 2000,4). Today’s university graduates are joining the second generation of environmentalism in Russia and China. This paper aims to provide an updated account of environmental activism in Russia and China, and the formation of the post-foreign-funding civil society. I will first discuss the state of grass-roots ENGOs in Russia and China, and their relationships with their foreign donors. I will then proceed to describe the contact between foreign activists and the generation born shortly after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the fall of the Berlin Wall and the crackdown on the students’ protests in Tiananmen Square. Though young activists in Russia and China see environmentalism as something “foreign”, that “foreigners know how to do”, I argue that at the same time this also makes it attractive to take part in. Foreign connections may have compromised the future of professional ENGOs in semi-authoritarian regimes, these same connections could invigorate environmentalism and attract second generation activists to the cause.

## **Methodology**

This study aims to shed light on social movements and their participants, and qualitative research techniques provide the appropriate methodology. I have followed civil society organisations during 14 cumulative months of fieldwork in Vladivostok, Moscow, Kunming and Beijing in 2014-2015. I conducted 160 semi-structured interviews with employees and senior members of ENGOs (10 at each site) and young people engaged in environmental activism (30 at each site), as a part of a larger comparative study. The choice of cities was defined by the presence of ENGOs and their

history of engagement in environmental protection. Comparing the two capitals was necessary as these are the centres of political decision-making and financial resources; provincial Vladivostok and Kunming were identified on the basis of their geographic similarities and the visible presence of international ENGOs. While I attempt to generalise for the four sites, this paper considers two cases in the capitals in more details. My experience of founding and running an ENGO in Vladivostok (2008-2011), as well as engaging with ENGOs in all four sites as an activist has provided me with insights on everyday challenges of fundraising and communications with the donors, and enabled me to develop an extensive network of contacts as well as providing me with access to international civil society seminars and capacity building workshops. I used these contacts to get access to ENGO leaders as a researcher, and I visited their offices to conduct interviews during 2014-2015. Having studied the grassroots established in the 1990s, I made contact with the student organisations that appeared in the 2010s. I joined those movements and took part in their projects and contributed to their campaigns.

The subjects of my study are young adults, under 35 years old, who self-identify as “activists” or “environmentalists”. The vast majority of activists in both countries are women, although men often hold leadership positions. All interviews were given with informed consent, and the names of all individuals and organisations have been changed in the paper. Due to complications of registration and NGOs status I will follow Dalton's definition of «environmental interest groups» that are ongoing, institutionalised advocates for political action that reach beyond the concerns of a specific locale (Kalland and Persoon, 1994;17). This paper focuses two participant observations I carried out in Moscow and Beijing. These were the key events for environmental movements in each city to gather activists, to give them training and to allow them to network and develop projects for further cooperation. Each event had around 30 attendees, was conducted by the leaders of environmental movements and had invited speakers from abroad. Participant observations as well as my knowledge of Chinese and Russian languages provided me with insights into these movements, as they allowed me to encounter key informants when they were working, relaxing and meeting their friend and colleagues. These encounters contribute to rapport, relationship between a researcher and subjects, possibly even more than formal interviews (Spradley, 1979).

Both Russian and Chinese respondents felt that their countries were very special, and that what worked elsewhere would not work in their domestic contexts. “You know, China is very special”, or “but this is Russia” - are phrases that probably every researcher who ever attempted to study those countries must be very familiar with (McAuley, 2015;10). Being a Russian myself, I

strived for objective representation of the two cultural contexts, however qualitative approach not seeking to argue representativeness especially for such vast countries as Russia and China, and it has to be acknowledged that the situation will be different in different regions and provinces. However, the millennials were born in a more globalised world and, as this paper will illustrate, engage with environmental activism in a similar ways in both countries, thus the findings of this research can be informative for other countries with semi-authoritarian regimes and young civil societies there.

### **First generation environmentalism and the dependence on foreign grants**

It is believed, that organised civil society can challenge state power, so the authorities seek to contain, co-opt, or channel organisations away from facilitating popular contention and into social services provision (Economy, 2005; Evans, 2010; Fu, 2016; Hildebrandt, 2011; Unger and Chan, 1995). In contemporary China and Russia, the semi-authoritarian regimes tolerate popular dissent to a certain extent and allow for civil society to exist as long as it does not challenge the authorities directly, as literature suggests (Hildebrandt, 2013; Mertha, 2008; Spires, 2012; O'Brien and Li, 2006). If to take a closer look to China, the concept of “embedded activism” describes how civil society operates in China by employing self-censorship, cooperating with the government and being embedded in State institutions (Ho, 2008). Ho and Edmonds (2007;2) suggest that, contrary to a «fully authoritarian» context in which the state wields virtually totalitarian control over society, the semi-authoritarian environment is restrictive of, but paradoxically, also conducive to nation-wide, voluntary collective action, with less risk of social instability and repression at the hand of the governing elite. I argue that this concept is applicable to Russia as well, as similar limitations have formed ENGOs that employ self-censorship, focus their activities on local or single issues and frame their activities within the official rhetoric, as the scholars of Russian civil society have illustrated (Cook and Vinogradova, 2006; Crotty, 2009; Henry, 2006).

ENGOs in Russia and China appeared in the early 1990's and were made up to a great extent of middle class elites: academics, journalists and other educated people, who often had connections with the West, could speak foreign languages and attended various courses and training (Crotty, 2009; Wu 2009). They were typically localised, small and informal, mostly engage with educational activities, tree planting and waste collection and did not not consider themselves political (Johnson, 2010; McAuley, 2015). During the 1990's and early 2000's ENGOs have nevertheless been success-

ful in communicating environmental causes to mobilise the public in order to bring around policy change.

Starting from such minor events, such as “innocent” pollution or deforestation cases like “PM 2.5 Air Pollution Campaign” in Beijing or “Khimki forest Campaign” in Moscow, the activists have managed to harness the attention of their local publics and international press to create politically charged movements (Boyd 2013, Evans 2012). These overstretched the boundaries of allowed political participation and made the governments fear that Arab-Spring-style revolutions, in which civil society has played a considerable role, could happen in Russia or China (ICNL, 2016; Mickiewicz, 2015). Recent NGO law of 2012 in Russia, that obliges organisations receiving foreign funding to register as «foreign agents», and the Overseas NGO Management Bill adopted in China in 2016<sup>15</sup>, which makes it harder to receive foreign grants, could be seen as a response to the political dissents sponsored by foreign grants. These laws have reinforced the regulations for receiving foreign funding adopted earlier and forced even more donors to leave first Russia and then China - the processes which started in 2006 and 2009 respectively. Many NGOs have been forced to dissolve, or to downsize their activities (ICNL,2016; Lipman, 2015). Small and middle sized ENGOs did not manage to attract large membership, to build large horizontal networks with domestic stakeholders and other NGOs, or act as counterweight to the State or counter the Soviet mindset of imposed volunteering- all of which limited their capacity to bridge between the individual and the state (Guo, 1998; Evans, 2002; Crotty, 2009; Henry, 2006).

One of the reasons for such failure as often named is a mismatch between the norms and values propagated by the NGOs and the values of local populations (Crotty, 2003). It has to be said, however, that it would be hard to have a binary division between Eastern and Western environmental ideas because, historically, cultural influences have not been only strictly one way. Hathaway (2013) develops a concept of “environmental winds” whereby ideals of natural environment have been travelling to and from China, becoming intertwined with other stakeholders and actors. Oldfield and Shaw (2016) also trace the history of emergence of Russian environmental thought throughout several centuries as a process interconnected with Western thinkers. It has also been argued that the influence of religion and confucianism in Asia on environmental movements is not as

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<sup>15</sup> See the Russian Federal NGO Law amendment of July 13, 2012 here - <http://docs.cntd.ru/document/902359005> ; The Law of the People’s Republic of China on Administration of Activities of Overseas NGOs in the Mainland of China of Apr 28, 2016 here - <http://www.mps.gov.cn/n2254314/n2254409/n4904353/c5548987/content.html>

strong as the influence of Western environmentalism concepts (Kalland and Persoon, 1998). However, mobilising wide public support under the concept that is considered to be “foreign” could be problematic.

Another reasons for such a precarious position could be the fact that Russian and Chinese ENGO have been sustained by overseas grants, and foreign funding always has serious political implications (Kalland and Persoon, 1998; 27; Cook & Vinogradova, 2006). Instead of bolstering ENGO development, overseas funding has created isolated organisations and widened the gap between them and society (Crotty, 2009; Fleay, 2012; Henry, 2001; Sundstrom, 2005, 2002). While acknowledging that western support was vital for the appearance and growth of NGOs in the Global South, this support has come with conditions that did not fit most of the local environments (Escobar, 2001; McIntosh-Sundstrom, 2005). Due to the political and legal crackdowns, and as a response to the loss of foreign funding, Russian and Chinese grassroots NGOs are disintegrating, dissolving or becoming embedded with State institutions. In cases where they did not have to shut down, they made themselves subservient to the State (Crotty, 2009; McAuley, 2016; Zoccatelli, 2016).

My fieldwork results are consistent with these findings and show that grassroots ENGOs are have to depoliticize their environmental activism. Despite the hopes of foreign foundations to bring about political changes in these countries, most ENGOs actively resisted confrontation with their national states and openly cooperated with their governments to solve environmental issues. As the majority of them stated in the interviews , they were not involved in any “political activity”. “We are avoiding politics, we care about the nature”, was the common response from the Heads and employees of ENGO in Vladivostok, Moscow, Beijing and Kunming.

Townsend et al. (2002) argue that the requirements placed on non-governmental development organisations by donors constitute a new form of imperialism: a managerial revolution through which specific governments sought to control costs and increase governability through the public sector has been extended by metropolitan states to Development NGOs to form part of their discourses and practices, so that significant overlaps in meta-languages of management and implementation may be found in improbable places. For example, the participants of the environmental anti-dam movement in the 1980’s in Hungary wondered if their projects were about the river or the whole system, and even referred to Western efforts to impose certain campaigning strategies as eco-colonialism or even “coca-colonialism” (Harper, 2006; 85). The stories I was told by ENGO leaders

across the four sites indeed supported this paradigm. The grassroots had to adapt to overseas donors' requirements, even if this would compromise their ability to carry out their projects.

Fleay (2012) also notes the dissonance between the "frames" of transnational Human Rights NGOs and the Chinese public. Following Fleay, Henry (2001) also cites the discontent in schools in Russia over issues raised by the foreign educational programs that were not relevant to "real" concerns such as pollution. In order to be able to receive grants from abroad my contacts have admitted that they have adopted "project-speak" slang: terms that did not necessarily reflect their own language and did not resonate with the wider public. NGOs learned to speak the language of the donors and mainstream environmentalism discourse - "greenspeak" (Yang and Calhoun 2007), or the vocabulary of "efficiency" critiqued by Escobar in the context of international development (2001). My contacts have mentioned difficulties that came not only with the process of fundraising, but also with the reporting after the projects have been completed. "It is like you write two different reports: one for the local government about tree planting, and one for the US embassy about community development and leadership and staff like that", a Vladivostok urban environment ENGO' leader said in an interview. "We are always very careful in how we frame things. We work with Beijing government to solve pollution problems, but then we tell our American partners that we are working against the government to bring Democracy", said a Founder of a Beijing-based grassroots ENGO.

My contacts, who grew up in Soviet Russia, while being grateful for the funding especially at the time of the economic crises of the 1990s, expressed discontent with the requirements of the foreign donors. First, there was the need to learn English, which many workers found very difficult, and moreover they never used it for anything else than the donors' "entertainment" (Head of a wildlife protection NGO, Vladivostok 2014). Second, many noted the failure to grasp the real needs of struggling grassroots organisations in Russia by the western foundations.

The most striking example, I was told about, was about a rare bird species, the gryphon, in the Russian Far East, that one European charity had decided to concentrate their protection activity on. They sent a large number of meat preserves to a wildlife protection NGO in Vladivostok for distribution to the villages in the regions where the bird lives. However, given that this was the early 1990s and the villagers, especially in the periphery in remote areas were struggling to survive, those preserves never reached the birds, but were taken by the people. "Why would they give per-

fectly good meat to birds, while people have nothing to eat ?”, commented a NGO worker (ENGO leader, Vladivostok, 2015).

Another example is the most illustrative from my fieldwork, while also being representative of the mismatch of managerial techniques with local practices. The words of the Head of Kunming middle-sized environmental NGO, a leader of the indigenous rights project:

*We have been living off German grants. They sent us German consultants and they spent some time observing how we work and what we do. They have re-arranged the entire office. They have put in new chairs and desks, they designed our working schedule and they designed how we should plan, how we should report and all that. They did not interfere with the nature of our work - so this was good. They did not dictate what we should work on, but they made it impossible for us to work! You know, they left us only an hour for lunch break. What can you do in an hour? You know, Chinese people need to take a nap after lunch. We need at least 2-3 hours break to go home and nap. Or have a sofa in the office for sleep. But they made us eat in the office, and left us with no time for a nap. Everyone was so tired, and could not work normally anymore. We were quite happy when they left. (Interview, Kunming, 2014).*

These stories of sending meat for the birds to the regions with people in need or suggesting western schedules for the office workers who are used to different routines have become anecdotal in the NGO communities I studied. Although it all may be true, but I also have witnessed similar situations by myself. When working with a Vladivostok orphanage in 2011, I have seen shipments of donated clothes from the USA that included XXL sized adult t-shirts. “Do Americans really think that Russian orphans are that fat?”, was an office joke at the time. Each ENGO I talked to had a similar anecdote that was illustrative of the wider misperceptions of methods offered and practices needed.

While many of my interviewees spoke fondly about their first years in their organisations about the excitement of the first trips abroad and their participation in the training programs, they also felt that sometimes the donors had been patronizing them and imposing their own priorities. Even if the locals felt that these projects were doomed to fail, they still had to go with it to be able to continue to receive grants. However over the past twenty years they became disillusioned about

the scope of their own impact on the one side, they started wondering if they were too “being used” to push donors’ agendas.

The ENGOs I met, even those operating successfully with the “embedded activism” environment are now trying to distance themselves from their foreign donors and their “western values” advocacy. Ironically, distancing from the foreign donors shifts these ENGO closer to their governments and stipulated “embedded activism”. At first sight it could be said that foreign connections have compromised and even endangered the development of environmental movements in Russia and China. While this might indeed be the case for the first generation of environmentalists, for the new generation of Chinese and Russians the promise of this cross-border communication in an increasingly globalised world can be the reason for engaging with environmental activism.

### **Second-generation environmentalism and turning the tables for foreign engagement**

Korten (1990) describes four generations of civil society in the Western World: the appearance of Relief and Welfare organisations after the first World War; the development of small-scale and self-reliant local organisations in the 1970s; the focus on the development of sustainable systems in the 1990s; and the current generation of civil society characterised by the co-operation of NGOs with other sectors. Wu Fengshi (2013) proposes that we are witnessing the beginning of a third phase of environmental activism in China, that is marked by a younger generation of social entrepreneurs and NGO leaders with considerably more diverse social backgrounds and cross-sectoral networks. McAuley (2015) speaks about the two generations of Russian NGOs, and defines the boundaries of the first one from the collapse of the Soviet Union to 2013, when the impacts of the NGO law started to be significant. I follow McAuley suggesting and also define the second generation in China, as the most recent emergence of post-foreign-funding civil society. While each generation is not homogenous, and looking even at the last decade of NGO development of Russia and China, one could identify different stages and changes in the civil society landscape. This paper also adopts Korten’s definition of around 25 years per generation and views the new wave of environmental activism as the second generation of civil society in both countries. With the changing economical and political landscapes, disintegration of the first generation of ENGOs and withdrawal of overseas funding from Russia and China, it is crucial to examine the role of youth in the environmental movements.

By 2010 founding members of the ENGO community- democratic activists of perestroika in Russia and dissidents of China - were giving way to younger generations (McAuley, 2015; Hansen and Svarverud, 2010). A new middle class was emerging with a small elite enjoying luxurious lifestyles, while hundreds of thousands of Russian and Chinese citizens had travelled abroad (McAuley, 2015; 12; Osnos, 2015). Although the political systems could be described as semi-authoritarian with 'state-capitalism' - where financial/business and political resources are often held in the same hands by the directors of a state agency or the political leadership, a younger generation of activists is stepping forward, whose formative years, and for some their childhood, were spent in post-Soviet Russia and post-reform China ( McAuley, 2015; Hansen and Svarverud, 2010).

Their projects are limited in scope: fundraising for people affected by natural disasters, charity activities, volunteering at farms and improving campus infrastructure, but their impact is amplified online and widely publicized in social media. The Information Technology (IT) revolution has truly changed the lives of millions of people in Russia and China, and access to social media is something that young people there can not imagine living without. Computers, the internet, and mobile phones have transformed communication between individuals, organisations and regions and have also been instrumental in facilitating environmental campaigning (McAuley, 2015; Yang and Calhoun, 2007).

The concept of "resigned activism" is instrumental in describing what the second generation of civil society consider as "activism" and validates their individual efforts as such (Lora-Wainwright, 2016). As the link between students and ENGO is often lacking, the people who "want to do something" have little opportunity to mobilise or engage in institutionalised activism. They therefore alter their individual lifestyles and change their own behaviours in order to make their own contribution to the environmental cause. For more developed student movements however, the concept of "prefigurative politics" would be more descriptive. Andy Cornell (2011) defines prefigurative politics as, "the principle that activists and social-change organisations should model in their present-day lives and work the new values, institutions, and social relationships they advocate for on a broader scale, as part of their strategy for bringing about that change." Young people, instead of waiting for the big change from the top, choose to "be the change" themselves, following the principal: "how we govern our individual life determines the character of international relations on our planet" (Biekart and Fowler, 2013: 155).

Having very limited political power to change things on the grand scale to improve their future, they run campaigns on a local scale and construct the vision of the future and the world they want to see through their actions in the present (Jeffrey, 2011). Being independent from foreign grants and the ability to generate far-reaching online impact leads to the change in the power relations with overseas donors and makes it possible to speak of a different generation of civil society in Russia and China.

In China, the emergence of second generation environmentalism has been marked by the spread of voluntarism and activism beyond Beijing and a mass grass-roots mobilisation after the Sichuan Earthquake in China in 2008 (Wu, 2013; Geall, 2013). My contacts in China often also cited this event as a turning point in their lives. “I have been donating money, everyone in our University has been donating. I really wanted to go and help, but my parents did not give their permission. But the next year I went to volunteer there without asking”, a Kunming leader of a volunteer project that helps rural farmers told me. The Russian contacts also recalled sending their pocket money to China, and then volunteering for a State-led project to host hundreds of Sichuan children who were brought to Vladivostok for rehabilitation. Similar to Sichuan case, my Moscow contacts talked about the devastating flooding in different Russian regions, Japanese tsunami and Fukushima tragedy, and Moscow peat fire smog of 2010 as the key events that affected them and mobilised to “do something about it”.

The two student groups that I followed are the most famous environmental movements in Beijing and Moscow, and all the ENGOs I studied in these cities were aware about these groups. They carry out various projects that are very local and concentrate on lifestyle changes, but also organise big public events such as festivals, conferences, round-tables, training, educational projects and lobbying universities or local officials for a better urban environment, energy efficient university buildings, the establishment of cycling lanes and clean energy use. They set up businesses and social enterprises that deal with waste, energy and water use and even ecosystem restoration. Most of their projects are not supported by any grants, and often are funded by participants themselves. While being concerned about global environmental issues, such as climate change, and having taken part in various environmental education activities facilitated by international NGOs, mostly they did not have any direct experience of negotiations with western donors because they did not have comprehensive fundraising strategies and do not depend on donations. Sometimes they would engage with different stakeholders on a case-by-case basis (they would accept one-off sponsorships from Universities or city administrations or local representatives of foreign foundation depending

on a project), or would raise money among themselves, but most of their activities do not require any financial support. They are however looking to establish these contacts with the West in order to learn from best practice abroad.

Their activists are mostly urban, middle-class university students and recent graduates, modern intellectual elites, who can afford to spend time engaged in voluntary activities and sometimes even finance these efforts themselves instead of applying for grants. Young Chinese and Russians grew up in the time of relative stability and economic growth, and they feel grateful for their positions and would love to give back to their society and the natural environment. All the subjects of my study are active on-line users, they have multiple social media accounts and some of the campaigns they run take place exclusively on-line, but not in practice. Both student groups I followed had pages of their organisations on local networks (VK and Weixin), as well as on Facebook, to appeal to an international audience, and make them look more cosmopolitan.

I argue that because of the way civil society has been set up and sustained, endowed by foreign grants, the generation of people who were born into this set-up have come to perceive environmental activism as something foreign and something that foreigners should teach. If in the first generation of environmentalism, foreign donors financially supported the ENGOs and taught them what to do, the movements of the second generation have turned the tables - they use their national grants and donations to pay the foreigners to come and teach them. The cases below demonstrate student activism in Moscow and Beijing and inform us about how the second generation of civil society in Russia and China engages with foreigner environmental expert and understand environmentalism.

### **Green Campus Moscow: Russian environmentalism with an English accent.**

I have been involved with the Green Summer School project run by Moscow students for three years as a participant and fully attended the third one at Moscow State University (MSU) in 2015 as an observer. The main goal of the School is to enable participants get to know each other, to engage them in common environmental projects, and ultimately - build a city-wide Green Campus movement. At present the Green Campus movement unites five of Moscow's biggest Universities. Each member University has a self-organised student club that runs environmental campaigns such as recycling, lobbying for bicycle lanes, resource conservation, environmental education, and the like. Several times a year these groups come together to organise common events such as summer

schools, green festivals and to take part in cycling campaigns. The members of the Green Campus movement also frequent EcoSalon, a discussion salon that takes place in upmarket restaurants to discuss environmental issues and to provide networking opportunities with ENGO professionals. Usually participants cover their own costs.

For the first two years the School has been hosted by the Strelka Institute of Urban Planning, which has a bar that is called “the main headquarters of Moscow’s hipster parade”<sup>16</sup>. The organisers, students and young professionals in all three years have designed the curriculum around the invited speakers - young professionals who work on Green Campuses in the USA, Denmark, Hungary and Germany. The speakers have also been selected on the basis of their personal connection to one of the organisers, Ivan. He has recently finished a Masters in Environmental Studies in Europe, and the speakers he invites are his former classmates, with whom he took part in green campaigns. Although Ivan was involved in green activism while he was a student in Moscow, and according to him, this involvement motivated him to his switch from studying economics to going abroad to study sustainability, he did not invite local MSU activists-speakers. Ivan said that there is nothing new that his colleagues could teach the students about, while having a foreign expert is always *kru-to* (cool), and is instrumental in attracting the participants, especially at the end of August (Interview, 2015).

The organisers have fundraised to bring the speakers, and asked the Universities to accommodate them for free. The School is also supported by a German Foundation, where a previous school participant and a friend of Ivan works. The names of the foreign experts were widely publicised and besides giving lectures they also carried out the role of facilitators who help the groups of Russian students to develop and implement environmental projects. None of the four speakers in 2015 had working knowledge of the Russian language. At the same time, around 10 out of 40 Russian participants did not have sufficient understanding of English, so they relied on an interpreter.

The examples that the foreigners had to share included organic gardening in their Universities, refurbishment of public buildings, petitions, demonstrations and public campaigns. These examples had very little relevance to a Russian context and to the projects that the students have been designing for further implementation. Out of 12 projects, 8 were dedicated to waste management, recycling and education. The only project dedicated to Climate Change had the purpose to “show-

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<sup>16</sup> According to the In Your Pocket travel guide, available online at: [http://www.inyourpocket.com/Moscow/Bar-Strelka\\_73507v](http://www.inyourpocket.com/Moscow/Bar-Strelka_73507v)

ing Europeans that Russians are also interested in Climate Change issues, like the rest of the world.” (Participant observation, Moscow, 2015).

However, despite being very critical of what the foreigners had to teach them and how relevant these lessons could be, all the participants of the School noted that the presence of foreign experts was amongst their top motivation for attending. “I came to learn from the international experience, to practice my English and to meet colleagues so we can build something good” - was the almost identical response to my questions about why they came. If in the first days they would crowd the experts and try to connect, being very excited about the new foreign friends, in the following two days they formed groups according to their interests and started working on common projects. In the last day, the groups presented their projects, which were evaluated by the expert team. The students treated the experts’ feedback very seriously and in the debriefing interviews said that they felt motivated and inspired to work on the projects that received “international approval”.

The foreign experts on the other hand felt incompetent advising on the students’ initiatives. For example, they felt that the timelines were too short and some projects were too ambitious. “They have amazing ideas, lots of enthusiasm... and they ask us to help them plan those projects. But look at European Climate Change week project. It is impossible to plan! It is in three weeks! How can you organise something like that? They really need to talk to their Rectors and other decision makers. I cannot help them, I just do not know these people” (A Dutch expert, Interview, Moscow, 2015). This reflects Mickiewicz’s (2015) point on different approaches to timing in Russia and the West, and that Russians generally need shorter notice as the projects happen more spontaneously.

Among the audience there was certainly an element of fascination in having foreign participants. The students were nervous, doubtful of their own levels of English. “I hope I will understand what they say” and “I came here to listen to the foreign guests, to see what they say”, were common comments. Although the students almost always reacted skeptically to experts’ presentations: “it worked in Germany, but this is Russia and it’s different”. The student projects have not incorporated any “best practices” from the presentations, but their names emphasised the “international” angle: “Uni goes green”, “VUZ eco-fest”, “eco-quest”. In the final part of the programme the students reported that they had found new networks and new project partners in Russia and ideas and were very motivated to continue working. A year later, without any direct contact or oversight from the foreigners, these teams are running dozens of projects, including the city-wide Eco festival, involv-

ing more than two thousand people, as well as ongoing on-line campaigns. Clearly they were capable of running these without foreign advises, but they thought it was necessary to be “part of the world” and to learn “how they do it over there”.

### **China Youth Green Forum: using a foreigner to unite Beijing’s activists**

Beijing’s Youth Green Forum (YGF) is a platform for facilitating common environmental projects across the universities of Beijing and other provinces in China. There is a coordination team that organises networking events for the members that consist of several recent graduates, who are employed full-time, paid by a combination of national and international grants. The movement of Chinese green students in Beijing is similar to Moscow’s in its goals and principles and even the way they campaign, although it is much larger in scale. The projects they carry out include conferences and trainings, on-line campaigns, environmental and climate change educational, recycling and energy saving initiatives. The members believe in individual small actions, such as diet change or using reusable chopsticks instead of disposable ones. Great importance is placed on building networks with different green clubs and finding partners from business and other sectors.

The leaders of Students Environmental Associations (SEAs), from 10 different Universities met at the student Hub at *wudaokou* for a workshop in November 2014 with the goal of coordinating projects in their own schools. The facilitator was Eduardo from Latin America, who studied Sustainability Science in Scandinavia. He was invited by a friend from a Chinese NGO to relocate to Beijing and to work as a facilitator for YGF. Eduardo conducts trainings for environmental activists in Beijing universities, and many of them take place in a student Hub at the University area of Beijing. He often invites his foreign friends to talk to students about activism. Although the students could not raise enough money to cover his living costs in Beijing, they found a person who had an extra bedroom and was happy to accommodate him in exchange for English classes.

Another person engaged with YGF is an American animal rights activist Sally. She moved to China with an NGO to promote animal welfare and vegan lifestyle. She made friends with the students and also attended most of YGF events. While having a clear agenda, Sally made a special effort not to impose her views on other people and only offered her point of view when asked to do so. The students were very excited to talk to her and to learn about issues that were new for them. Sally managed to set up booths for her NGO in several Beijing Universities with the help of the

YGF, although she admitted that the students were more excited about the foreign and Chinese celebrities that were invited, than about the cause.

The students at the workshop shared their experiences of running environmental clubs in their universities, looked at their own motivations for continuing the work, which is unpaid and in many cases is against their parents' will, and made plans for the future. Their acts of environmental service were largely symbolic life-choices: using a water bottle instead of buying bottled water, eating less meat, running an environmental blog, setting-up movie screenings and putting up the stickers about energy saving in their universities. The interviews with the students show that they see environmentalism as a worthy cause, and that it is just important for them to "get things right", while also improving their own health. The issue of air pollution in Beijing has been mentioned in every single discussion, and the students mentioned foreign blogs and websites where they read about the pollution levels, which shows their mistrust in the official information. In the manner of "resigned activism" the students adopted self-coping strategies, such as using special masks and purifying their homes and keeping plants at their apartments. They also made conscious efforts to decrease their carbon footprint and to encourage their peers to do the same. Sally and Eduardo were trying to encourage them to think what could be done on a global level, or if they could address the local government, but the students seemed disinterested in lobbying or campaigning.

The leaders of the YGF, said that Eduardo was really helpful in attracting new people to the cause because he is "popular and more people come to see him". The students admitted that they were learning a lot from him, although his examples were not relevant because "China is very different from the West". The participants told me that they were also using those meetings to improve their English, as besides caring for the environment, they were also interested in personal development. Eduardo is certainly instrumental in fulfilling these demands and in his free time he explains the best techniques to learn English and the health benefits of doing sport and being vegan. During the breaks the students looked very shy, yet excited to talk to a foreigner. They approached me, a guest at their event, to know what I was studying and to ask how to get a scholarship at Oxford.

Eduardo and Sally left China in Autumn 2015 after a year of work, however the YGF continue to be increasingly active, running online and offline campaigns that engage thousands of Beijing students. The major part of their work now is Climate Change education, and the members of YGF form China's youth delegation for the annual climate negotiations conferences. I met a couple of them during COP 21 in Paris in 2016, and they told me that the projects they were doing in Bei-

jing have now grown and are being run by other people, which shows leadership transition and sustainability and attractiveness of the initiatives they were promoting.

### **Comparing the capitals and beyond.**

The cases described above are similar to each other in their aims and scope of engagement while also conforming to the global environmentalism discourse. The projects carried out by the activists in the capitals were very similar in their approach, the issues they dealt with and implementation strategies to the projects I observed in the Russian Far East and Chinese Far West. In all the cases the main events that were designed to attract new participants and to commit to environmental project had at least one foreign speaker. Furthermore, these speakers had been widely publicised and the participants mentioned that they came to listen to “what the foreigners have to say”.

At first sight, these findings could suggest that Russian and Chinese young people, the first generation born after the collapse of the Soviet Union to an “open” world, just want to establish the contact with anyone from abroad and to learn English. Unlike the first generation of environmentalists, they do not feel that the language is being imposed on them and they are proactively looking for opportunities to practice. But if that was the case, they have plenty of other opportunities to learn the language without engaging in any activism. Free language circles hosted by religious American groups, Model United Nations debates conducted in English and with participation of international students and other activities are plentiful and popular in each study location. The subjects of my study have chosen the environmental cause for a variety of reasons, and seeing oneself as a citizen of the world and closer to the western lifestyle is what makes it attractive. Moreover, I would argue that these students perceive environmentalism as something western and base their prefigurative politics on what they perceive to be European and American models of a clean natural environment and a healthy lifestyle.

Although they never said so openly, I have come to believe that by adopting the prefigurative politics to create better environments around them, the students wanted to see their countries become more western. In private conversation, while being patriotic, my contacts would sometimes express an overly simplified view that “everything is good in the West, and everything is bad at home”, when they spoke about the natural environment, and especially urban planning. They were also unsure how to make their own environments cleaner: “Of course it is easy to make people recycle in Germany, the recycling bins are everywhere and the citizens really abide - try pulling that

off in Russia!” (A student activist, Moscow, 2015). “Of course you can cycle on your campus in the USA, the traffic is not dangerous and nobody will steal your bike” (A leader of a student environmental movement, Vladivostok, 2014). “You always know when you buy organic in Europe, because you can trust the labels. Everything is fake in China” (A student activist, Beijing, 2014).

The students in Russia and China, while consciously avoiding any political confrontation, envision the western approach to everyday environmentalism for their future, and they build their it in the present by mixing the “resigned activism” approach with prefigurative politics. For example, one personal action that young people took at all four study locations was using lunch boxes and glass plates instead of disposable ones. They proudly reported that some of their colleagues and classmates have started doing the same.

Second generation environmentalism is cosmopolitan, fashionable and international. Eating organic vegetarian food, using reusable chopsticks in fancy cases and going to vintage markets to buy second-hand clothes all are the attributes of alternative “sustainable lifestyle” that for young Chinese and Russians are quite rebellious given the mainstream consumerism cultures and meat-heavy diets. But unlike individual or family-oriented tactics that rural Chinese “resigned activists” use (Lora-Wainwright, 2016), these urban middle-class young people are using their networks and social media to publicise and promote their lifestyle, amplifying the impact of their individual actions.

Their belief that the Westerners “got it right” is grounded in visual experiences from TV shows or their own trips abroad. Visible and labelled recycling bins, environmental messages in the hotels, joggers and cyclists in the parks, organic products in the shops, eco-fashion and sustainable cafes - the attributes of a western lifestyle, that my study subjects saw during their travels or heard about from their foreign friends. By making their campuses greener in Moscow, installing separate waste collection in Kunming, growing an organic food garden in a rooftop of the student Hub in Beijing and lobbying for bicycle lanes in Vladivostok, the second generation of environmentalists is using prefigurative politics to build the world they want to live in. They cycle to work because that is how people do it in the Netherlands, and not because they cannot afford a car. Their lifestyle blogs and environmental petitions attract thousands of young internet users. In line with the “embedded activism” strategies, they partner with government to conduct landmark projects such as University Eco-Festival, supported by the Moscow government, or the China Youth Climate

Change Conference, supported by the Party, attracting thousands of people off-line and even more online.

These informal networks could be a basis for mobilisation for collective action (Fu, 2016). However these movements seemingly do not even have mobilisation as their goal. The students do not see environmentalism as a political struggle in the same way as the first generation saw it, they seem to subscribe to neoliberal ideology and accept that better environment is their own responsibility, and that they can achieve sustainability by altering their individual lifestyles. This is not unique to China or Russia, but could possibly be a global trend in developing countries. For example Tsing (2011) describes the cosmopolitan lifestyle of Indonesian student nature-lovers, and Mwaura (2013) argues that Kenyan students are attracted to environmental movements to manifest their cosmopolitan identity, an urban/middle class distinction, and to improve their career prospects.

A shared identity has been recognised as a central component of movement participation and identification with a cause and can foster the solidarity necessary for collective action among individuals (Van Dyke and Maccamon, 2010). This generation is building their alternative narratives and creating a shared identity of urban cosmopolitan environmentalism similar to the first generation of ENGOs, but this time they are not being paid to do that. It is possible to suggest that the second generation of civil society came to perceive environmentalism as something foreign, thanks to the efforts of international foundations and grassroots ENGO they have supported. These students appropriating western environmentalism narratives and make it their own, without the direct donor influence.

The “foreign experts” described in the cases above, on the other hand did not try to impose their views or strategies. On the contrary they were bemused as to why accomplished and Russian and Chinese student leaders would want their advices at all. At the closing ceremony of the Moscow summer school, the German expert said: “I hope that the next year it will not be just our monologue, but we will have a dialogue. You won’t just listen to how things are done in Germany, USA or Denmark, but you will show us how the things are done in Moscow, in Saint-Petersburg, Novosibirsk and Vladivostok”.

## **Conclusion**

My research shows that the first generation of grassroots ENGOS in Russia and China have passed through similar stages of development, confronted similar challenges and adopted similar coping strategies when faced with the crack-down. Dependence on foreign grants, clashes between global environmental discourses and local pollution concerns, existence in a tiny niche of allowed political participation led them to isolation from the general public and hindered their chances of survival after the adoption of restrictive laws on NGOs activities. In most cases across the two countries, small and middle-sized ENGOS were unable to diversify their income due to the absence of an alternative funding coming from public donations. While foreign support contributed to establishing civil society in its starting phase in Russia and China, these same connections two decades later have simultaneously hindered its development.

The second generation of environmentalists in Russia and China, as the first one is made up of mostly the urban elites - University students and recent graduates. Two decades of economic growth in both countries by 2010 have created a class of young people who can afford to do volunteer work and travel abroad. The “international” nature of environmentalism makes it even more elitist and hence attractive for young people to join the movement. The new cosmopolitan identities and the sub-cultures that such movements create are expressed through altering the individual lifestyles of their members, small action projects, larger events and ongoing on-line campaigns.

Without direct influence of foreign funding, the leaders of environmental movements in Russia and China choose to invite experts from overseas to teach them the best practices of environmentalism. Environmentalism for them is not a struggle, not a fight for justice, and not a political campaign. It is a lifestyle choice that makes one healthier, happier and a more successful citizen of the world. A citizen of the Western world, as well as of one own nation state. Student environmental activists that this paper argued represent the second generation of civil society in Russia and China they are building this Western world at home, but using the “embedded activism” patterns of non-controversial public participation the first generation of ENGOS had to follow.

They try to build the world they want to see without any political confrontation through the official channels available by combining personalised “resign activism” strategies with prefigurative politics to impact their immediate surroundings. These small actions, of course, may not seem grand in comparison to the first generation ENGOS, but these changes do not depend on one-off grants and it makes them more sustainable. Because they assume that environmentalism is a lifestyle and not a job, they are promoting the cause even after office hours, and their impact is amplified online.

Despite the state efforts of governments to limit Western influence, the younger generation that is taking over the environmental movements is fascinated by the West. The “foreign” and “international” frames are appealing and exciting. Although foreign expertise is not always applicable in Russian and Chinese realities, it is instrumental in attracting and sustaining the interest in environmentalism from young people, who have more choices and routes in life competing for their attention than their parents have ever had.

As the cases in this paper have shown, with or without foreign experts, the movements continue working online and offline. They build networks and engage the public in social media platforms not because they have been told to do so, but because they believe it is the “right thing to do”. This approach has multiple advantages, as young people are fluent in “green speak” and successful at building horizontal networks and present environmental activism as attractive and localised instead of imposing it or being paid to promote it. I argue that emergence of such movements could be considered a successful outcome of more than two decades of international donor engagement with Russia and China.

It is possible to speculate that if these activists will indeed make their campuses or cities look like western ones - clean, people-friendly and sustainable, they would look for political freedoms too. If they succeed in bringing about infrastructural and decorative changes, would they look for democratic changes after that ? Will their “resigned prefigurative politics” turn their apolitical environmental movements into active political ones? The activists have little illusions about their impact and do not expect to overturn the world by changing their diet or hosting a conference. The post-foreign-funding civil society, as this paper suggests includes a new urban generation of “embedded entrepreneurs” who are even more cosmopolitan and well-travelled, are comfortable using universal “green speak” offline and online, and masterfully localise and promote environmentalism. Further investigation is required to evaluating the effectiveness of such an embedded civil society in semi-authoritarian regimes.

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#### **Chapter 4 ( Paper III)**

## **Post-foreign-funding youth environmentalism with Chinese characteristics: cases of green Hubs in Kunming and Beijing**

*The more foreigners I met in Kunming, the more I realised that something is different outside. The world is different, and I don't want to be just Chinese, I want to be a part of the world.*  
*Ming, 30 y.o. environmental project leader*

### **Abstract**

Chinese civil society is grappling with the recent political changes that have affected the ability of Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) to receive funding and strained their connections with the foreign partners. This paper explores the “under-the-radar” environmental movement of urban China, which has grown in the past few years, in the absence of formal contact with small and middle-sized ENGOs and without any financial support from the foreign donors. This paper uses Green Hubs, hang-out spaces for youth in Kunming and Beijing, as case study to demonstrate why young people engage in post-foreign-funding environmental activism and what are its main characteristics.

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### **Introduction**

On Spring 2015 the student environmental activists I met during my fieldwork in Kunming are organising the screening of the *Under The Dome* documentary. This movie about air pollution in China has made waves on the Internet and was taken down by the officials almost immediately after its release (Lora-Wainwright, 2016). It took a third-year arts student Jin just under five minutes to find it and set it up using a VPN. Although the students said they didn't care about the censorship, they preferred not to advertise the screening widely and not to use the university premises. If they like the movie, they said, they will screen it in the Green Hub - the place where environmental activists meet in Kunming.

We met at the English tutor Ming's apartment, who I came to know through my engagement with the Green Hub's project. Ming runs a charity which teaches young people about sustainability and overconsumption. At her day job as a tutor, she assigns topics about climate change, pollution and other environmental issues to her students. *"This is my mission,"* she said once, *"to make these children think, to make them see that the world is bigger than just China."*

The start of the Chinese environmental movement is often attributed to the economic reforms that opened China to the West in the 1980's, and the proliferation of Environmental Non-Governmental Organisations (ENGOS). Since then it has been intertwined, supported and to some extent dependant on the Western funding and global civil society (Yang, 2005). As funding always has political implications, some foreign funders encouraged ENGOS to tackle more globally relevant issues, instead of working on local service provision (Yang and Calhoun, 2007; Yiyi Lu, 2007). In order to exist in a complicated political context of the Chinese regime, activists had to avoid contested topics, such as minority or gay rights, and prefer to focus on politically safe issues such as environmental education and conservation, whilst utilising "global" discourses to recruit members and appeal to international donors (Ho 2008; van Rooij 2010; Yang 2010; Lora-Wainwright et al. 2012).

This fact has created contention between donors, ENGOS and the Chinese State, and it has been argued that ENGOS had to depoliticise and to become "embedded" within the governmental structures to continue their work (Ho and Edmonds, 2007). Some scholars argued that by using "embedded activism" strategies ENGOS would be able to bring about policy change from within which may lead to China's democratisation (Yang, 2005; Geall, 2013; Johnson, 2013). Over the years ENGOS won some impressive campaigns, and they were also instrumental in increasing public discourse about environmental topics, which allowed to depoliticise environmentalism and bring it into the wider public discourse. However, their position did not become stronger, and the Democratic change is yet to happen (Yang and Calhoun, 2007). To the contrary, the recent years saw assaults on civil society, which culminated in the Chinese Overseas NGO Management Bill and negatively affected small and middle-sized ENGOS, forcing many to close and resulted in the reshaping the landscape for environmental activism in the whole country (Fedorenko, 2016). As my previous research shows, these changes had a negative effect on Chinese young people's perception of activism and ENGOS, and made them scared of getting involved in organised campaigns (Fedorenko, 2017).

While there are many challenges that the Chinese civil society faces, the vast human resources available to grassroots NGOs are probably the single most unpredictable development fac-

tor, as without this pool of supportive human capital and talent, the grassroots ENGO community would not be able to survive long under China's restrictive political conditions (Spires et al., 2014). This research focuses on this crucial element of environmental activism - China's youth.

Ming and other 60 people I met during my year-long fieldwork in Kunming and Beijing, all belong to the millennial generation - young people who were 18 years old and younger in the year 2000 (Howe and Strauss, 2000; 4). Most of them are university students or recent graduates who have chosen to devote their free time to environmental and social causes and are interested in the protection of the natural environment (自然保护 *ziran baohu*). Some of them belonged to a non-profit or a business, but most did not belong to any organisation, nor a political party, nor a governmentally-supported organisation. They all, however, took part in environmental projects organised by the city Hubs - independent non-profit groups based in apartment buildings and run by young people. I discovered the Hubs by accident, having heard about similar structures in Moscow<sup>17</sup> and after being referred to them by Western activists as well as by local Chinese students when I asked where I could find young people working on environmental issues.

Student engagement in environmental campaigning and volunteering has been steadily growing, with young people forming university-based clubs and societies or joining Students' Environmental Association (SEA) (Mangoldt, 2016; 4). It was suggested that the growth in youth activism and volunteering started after 2008 Sichuan earthquake, when thousands of students donated money, organised fundraising events or even travelled to the province to help (Geall, 2013). China's young are among the main constituents of the environmental movement as they provide a large support base for ENGO campaigns, and numbers of SEA members continue to grow across China (Mangoldt, 2016; 9).

Elizabeth Economy (2004:166) notes the significance of the younger generation of environmental activists in shaping the movement's trajectory. Closing down the public space for small and medium-sized ENGOs could endanger the environmental movement and its future. Investigating young people's motivations, and how they reshape environmental activism in the absence of ENGOs is key to our understanding of the Chinese environmental movement post-2015.

New forms of environmental activism are emerging across China, and this paper investigates these new "under the radar" activities that take place in the Hubs - semi-commercial spaces, which act as cafes or hostels, while also providing the base for young people to get together, to discuss whatever is on their minds and run any projects they wish. Some of them choose to engage in

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<sup>17</sup> My previous research on parallels between Chinese and Russian environmentalism could be found in Fedorenko 2016, Fedorenko, 2017.

environmentalism<sup>18</sup>. This research presents Hubs as hotbeds for the relatively new forms of youth engagement in environmental causes, with Kunming Green Hub (KMGH) founded in 2013, and Beijing Green Hub (BJGH) in 2012. Conceptually they belong to the network of Student Hubs in the UK<sup>19</sup>, however formally they are not parts of any UK network, but were established with the creative help of British students who presented these ideas and contributed to building these places<sup>20</sup>. Both Kunming and Beijing Hubs routinely had around 30-40 attendees for the each event they organised: from yoga classes to green clubs to English language circles.

I argue that the appearance of Hubs marks the transformation of environmental activism, by providing an alternative to ENGOs and university-based societies, and reflects the change of political climate towards civil society in China. They represent a new form of networking and environmentalism suited to the current political climate and they enable particular types of interactions, networks, and engagements which are suited to the millennials. The Hubs and the content that they are creating constitute the new public sphere of environmental discourse where young people engage in debate about environmental issues and channel their opinion to disseminate “greenspeak”, using the Internet as a primary tool to proclaim their power and mobilise publics (Yang and Calhoun, 2007; 211). This paper analyses the new characteristics of the “post-foreign-funding” civil society and investigates how Chinese young people express themselves through an environmental cause. The research analyses Hubs operations in the capital, Beijing, and the periphery with the longest history of biodiversity protection and ENGOs Kunming, Yunnan. I first unpack the motivations of volunteers to join these Hubs, and how they use their involvement to benefit their “life-making” strategies. I then proceed to situate the Hubs in the global environmental movement and I conclude by describing the kind of environmentalism young people are promoting.

## Methodology

I used qualitative research methods, and I have adopted a participatory research approach which involved getting embedded with Chinese activists and taking part in their projects. I subscribed to a language course in a university in Kunming and spent an academic year of 2014/2015

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<sup>18</sup> I use a broad definition by of environmentalism as the propensity to take actions with pro-environmental intent (Stern, 2000: 411).

<sup>19</sup> See the official website for more information on the UK Hubs - <http://www.studenthubs.org>

<sup>20</sup> My contacts only called these places “Hubs” in English, and sometimes are referred to them as “centres” (中心 *zhongxin*). Although each Hub had an individual name, they will not be mentioned in this paper.

living in a dormitory with other students, making friends and going to all the clubs, societies and volunteering events that worked on environmental protection. Being a youth ambassador for the UNESCO Education for Sustainable Development initiative and thanks to my previous experience of working and researching ENGOs in China I was able to gain access to the relevant networks and identify key individuals who would act as my “mentors”, making me an “ethnographic apprentice” (Agar, 1996). These people would introduce me to other activists and key environmental organisations in each city. I participated and helped organise various events, and I was able to meet young activists and to be invited to their training and study sessions. I had also subscribed to all the relevant groups on WeChat, the most popular mobile messenger app in China. I also spent most of my free time “hanging out” with the subjects of my research. This participant observation strategy that allows becoming an “informant’s apprentice,” but also ask targeted questions (Agar, 1996; 242; Mangoldt, 2016: 64).

I considered “activists” to be those people who identified themselves as such and who shared a strong engagement in environmental collective actions or campaigns borne out of environmental concerns of various kinds (Rootes, 1997, p. 326). I have collected over 60 interviews (30 at each study location), all of them open-ended and lasted over an hour. Many interviews had follow-ups with a few interactions lasting over 4 or 5 hours. While I conducted some interviews in Chinese, most of the time we would speak in English as young people also wanted to practice their language skills and took the opportunity to ask me questions about Oxford University and studying in England.

By living as a student and taking part in the same projects, I managed to develop trust and friendships with people. We met and went out with other activists several times a week, and we discussed the “innocent” everyday topics in Chinese, but when politics or something sensitive would be touched, my contacts would switch from Chinese to English in public places, so “other people wouldn’t understand,” as they explained. This change in languages reflected the changes in political context that were happening during my fieldwork, as the Chinese Government unleashed an anti-western campaign and closed down space for civil society, about which my contacts were keenly aware<sup>21</sup>. For this reason, I anonymised all the respondents and tried to make organisations names unrecognisable.

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<sup>21</sup> The Communist Party issued an internal document—Document No. 30—reportedly to purge “Western-inspired liberal ideas” from universities and prohibit teaching and research on such topics as media freedom and human rights. More information about Document 30 can be found in the China Commission report, available online <http://www.cecc.gov/sites/chinacommission.house.gov/files/2015%20Annual%20Report.pdf>

Living together with the subjects of my study, and being one of them, a student and an activist in a university dormitory, I have experienced the lifestyle that was enforced on students by the dormitory policies. This has enabled me to acquire a more nuanced understanding of participants' experiences, than a purely interview-based research would. While I do not attempt to generalise for the whole country, living as a student activist, developing close friendships in Kunming and Beijing, provided me with an in-depth understanding of young people, their views, and motivations.

### **Why do young people join the environmental cause and come to the Hubs?**

After we finished watching *Under the Dome* film in Ming's apartment, young people engaged in a spontaneous discussion. While the students are very well aware of the air pollution problem in China, the statistics and stories of pollution-related illnesses presented in the film shocked them. "*What can I do to protect my self? How can we protect our environment and clean up the air?*" asks Zhang, a second-year accounting student. After seeing the footage of London's lush green parks featured in the film, Jin turned to me and said: "*You must love living in London. Is it so clean and beautiful, I dream I could see it one day*". These students dream of making China as clean and safe as they imagine Western countries are<sup>22</sup>, and they spend their free time working towards this vision.

In Beijing's Green Hub, young people are seated in a circle on the floor. The moderator places a small crystal in the middle of the circle to gather group's "good green vibes". They are planning an air pollution awareness campaign. They want to raise awareness on their university campuses about different types of face masks that filter PM 2.5 and the plants that help to clean up the air indoors. "*We will need permission from the University if we want to do this on campus*", a young females student raises a concern. "*No problems, I am a president of SEA, and I will ensure that our University will allow such useful project to go ahead,*" says a girl seated across her. The connection is made, and the moderator asks the two girls to report back to the group next week on the campaign progress at their University. The meeting finishes by the students drawing pictures of a "green Beijing" on the flip charts and writing down the steps necessary to achieve their vision.

Despite the pressure on young people to succeed and study well, volunteer engagement and youth-led activism are on the rise all over China and researchers have tried to explain why young

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<sup>22</sup> I have noticed that most of my contacts had an idealised vision of the "West" and generally thought that Europe and USA were the ideals of environmentally friendly countries and green living. Addressing this perception in-depth is beyond the scope of this paper, however, it is important to acknowledge as a vision that young Chinese environmentalist strive towards.

people give away their time and money to causes they do not directly benefit from. For example, a study on rural Chinese youth painted the picture of a generation that internalises their failures and victories and is under a lot of stress (Halskov, Hansen and Pang, 2010). Young people worry about the future and their ability to earn enough income and only think about volunteering in the context of the Party when it has something of practical value to offer them (ibid).

Malfrid and Rolandsen (2010) argue that youth joins the Party's volunteering organisations to become part of the collective, while still being acknowledged as individuals. The authors point out that the willingness of young people to spend time doing social work outside of the family presents a break from the "family-first" values and also linked to a Western lifestyle (ibid, p. 135). However, they prove that the choices are dictated by work competition, and many are attracted to volunteering for building useful networks, improve their skills and contribute to the society. They also note that the concept of volunteering is poorly understood in the Chinese society, volunteering activities are not recognised as assets to the students' CVs and do not add value outside of the Party realm, therefore students involvement cannot be explained with reference to selfish pursuit of personal benefits and also list compassion and duty as key drivers (ibid, p. 155). Chinese youth invest in their personal development or "life-making" through environmental activism because it allows them to develop valuable skills and connect with a wider world.

On the global stage, it is argued that the processes of globalisation and civil society represent the birth of "global citizenry" that shifts from "me and mine to we and ours" discourse (Biekart and Fowler, 2013). Analysing the protests and acts of public dissent such as Arab Spring and the "Occupy" movement all around the world, some have argued that the new form of global resistance, called "activism 2010+" is emerging and middle-class young people are the main actors in it (Biekart and Fowler, 2013). The authors argue that these forms of activism represent "a distinct shift in the character of civic engagement as they surf on waves created by the increased availability and use of social media, and by a common set of rights-based demands" (ibid: 534).

A comprehensive study of Beijing SEA's suggests that although university students are under a lot of pressure to find jobs and succeed and grow anxious about their employment prospects, they are also affected by the global values of environmentalism, even if they choose complacency over the "chaos" of dissent and do not fully belong to activism 2010+ movement (Mangoldt, 2016: 35). It also finds that students wanted to be involved with University-sanctioned campaigns and famous ENGOs to gain transferable skills and improve their CVs (ibid,:195).

The activity of young people in the Hubs showed that while they may not join the global environmental movement through their activism, but they are attracted by the global environmental

discourse and the opportunities to connect with the wider world that the Hubs provide. The “fresh contact” with environmentalism for the current young people is one where environmental activism is closely linked with the West and is global and transnational, and becoming a part of it can help them in the future.

University years are formative for Chinese students in the process of “life-making” as they are acquiring skills to be able to find good jobs. Ann Anagnost sees “life-making” as investments in the self to ensure one’s career progression as embodied human capital (2013:2). On each University campus, in Kunming, and even to a larger extent in Beijing, there are countless opportunities, clubs, and societies for students to get involved with. Most of my contacts recognised that University-based societies could be useful and beneficial for their careers and personal development, especially if they are interested in working for the Government, as this is seen as an opportunity to acquire useful connections (关系, *guanxi*). *“Most students don’t join anything. But those who do, they chose to do something useful, like finance - to learn how to buy shares, or they join a debating society to learn English,”* said Yue, a second-year student of social science and an environmental activist in Kunming.

A student from Beijing told me that joining an official University club may bring some extra-credits for class work or acquire useful *guanxi*. Students in Kunming also noted that if one wanted to volunteer they would approach a teacher, and they would suggest some project or an organisation to get involved. It would be possible to suggest that in such case informal structures outside the campus would provide less value to students, and there is little incentive to engage in activism outside of the official realm.

Malfrid and Rolandsen (2010) noted that young people engage in activism only after their material needs were met and they had time to spare, for example, urban young Chinese enjoy an abundance of spare time, without responsibility for children and elderly members (2010:137). Having lived a student’s life, I experienced first-hand that it is very hard to make time for any off-campus activities. For a Kunming student, on top of 8 am to 5 pm classes, cleaning and cooking, doing homework, finding hot showers and doing occasional laundry (the laundry room and the shower rooms were on the opposite end of the giant campus), while knowing that one has to be back before the dormitory doors close at 10 pm, there was not much time left for any activities outside of the campus. One has to be very motivated and passionate about the cause to find time to attend a meeting and even travel anywhere from 30 minutes to 2 hours for an event at the Hub. However, all the

meetings I attended were always full of enthusiastic students (although the number has never exceeded 60 people at a time), who would take two or three buses to come from their universities.

The millennial generation of Chinese youth has seen rapid economic growth over their lifetime. Contacts from BJGH and KMGH described to me how their parents grew wealthier, how they used to live in villages without running water, and now they own multiple apartments in big cities. Some of them now feel responsible for the state of the environment of their country, and they are looking for ways to “give back.” Malfrid and Rolandsen, define this phenomenon among young volunteers as “reciprocity” — the desire to give back to others, to society, and in the case of environmental activism, to nature. One week after watching the documentary *Under the Dome*, five students who watched the movie with us showed up at KMGH for the first time. They said that they were terrified to see the consequences of air pollution on health and they came to the Hub to join their friends and “*do something about it*” and “*to give back to society.*”

“*Wanted to do good*” was a key phrase, that I heard in almost every conversation. “*I was taking part in this (sustainable roof farming project), because I wanted to be useful, I wanted to do something different, something meaningful*”, a student in Beijing said. “*I had some time and I wanted to do meaningful things, and I wanted to know what is society, and I wanted to know how to be a good person for the society,*” said Jin after the meeting in KMGH.

Friendship, and finding a community of like-minded people, who share the same values was also a big motivator to join the Hubs. “*I started going to the Hub meetings, because my roommate did so, and she enjoyed it, and I wanted to come with her,*” was a common phrase I would hear in Kunming. “*I go to the Hub to meet other like-minded people and because I really care about the environment. I want to change something in Beijing, and I am here to learn what I can do and to meet people who think like me,*” was the response from Sheng, a final year economics student in Beijing. A KMGH attendee once made a public speech about the importance to organise the Earth Day and why she thinks it is important to take part in the Hub’s activities: “*I have more friends now than I ever had, you all are like a family to me. I come here to see my family*”, she said trying to make more people sign up.

While a lot of fieldwork material supported the statement that young people join the Hubs because they want to belong to a group and find more friends, this motivation is not unique to the Hubs or the environmental cause, and could possibly be attributed to any other society or sports club, where students also join to find friends and make new connections. The critical factors that differentiate the Hubs, from other official student societies, are the lack of censorship and oversight, and the absence of bureaucracy and the exposure to the western world through their global envi-

ronmental discourse. For the students who are engaged with the Hubs, the skill set and connections that they acquire makes them a part of a global environmental discourse, makes them more “international”, and this in itself is valuable for them. My participant observation suggests that the activists benefit from their involvement with the Hubs in several ways.

The involvement with the Hubs could lead to securing internships or even jobs. Although I found that it was more relevant for Beijing than for Kunming, as at the time of my fieldwork Kunming had already been affected by the impacts of the NGO law and many organisations had to close, while Beijing still enjoyed a robust NGO ecosystem (Fedorenko, 2016). While at both cities, former connections between the Hubs and established ENGOs didn't exist, in Beijing students would often go on to secure internships with big organisations. This was largely due to a second-year English student member of the BJGH who established a WeChat group where she aggregated NGOs' internship opportunities and circulated them among the Hub members. Through European and American participants, BJGH members also secured projects and consulting work in large multinational corporations. In Kunming, I didn't hear a single story of anyone finding a job through the Hub, but they did engage with volunteering projects led by Western religious organisations or the Red Cross.

The possibility of entering Western universities is another aspect of “life-making” that Hubs' networks could facilitate. Chinese students are increasingly interested in going abroad for their studies, with 46 of my 60 contacts mentioning they were thinking about applying to American, Canadian, British or Australian universities. While they never expressed an explicit connection between their activities at the Hubs and their future study plans, it could be assumed that by their contribution to environmental projects they are potentially adding weight to their applications.

First, by meeting foreigners and making friends with foreign students, they improve their English language skills. Secondly, extra-curriculum activities are valued by admission committees in western universities and engaging volunteer projects might add weight to their applications. Third, through the exposure to foreigners themselves, and by being subscribed to online newsletters and WeChat groups, the students receive information about different opportunities abroad and may also seek advice on different schools or ask for feedback on their applications. Several times I saw foreign students, including Fulbright scholars, hosting sessions on internships, interview techniques and writing resumes for the Hub members. For all these services, Chinese study abroad agencies would charge a fee, while Hub members would help each other for free, because of the atmosphere of friendship and reciprocity the Hubs create.

It could be argued that taking part in the activities of the Hubs, brings useful skills to students and helps them in their “life-making,” whether their goals are to study abroad, to find a good job, build networks or travel. These connections to the world beyond China, the opportunity to build friendships with foreigners that are not mediated by any official organisation and becoming a part of the global green public sphere are unique to Hubs, and the next section will look at them in more detail.

### **Western influences, foreigners and global environmentalism in the Hubs**

Environmentalism has become associated with foreigners in China, which manifests in Hubs’ activities and influences students’ motivation to join the environmental cause. It has been widely documented that the first generation of environmentalists in China, that appeared in the late 1980s, was formed by people with international experience, and was financed by Western grants (Calhoun and Yang, Johnson 2013, REF). China’s observers have emphasised the importance of foreign education in building the capacity of civil society, saying that many of the leaders have received their education abroad (Kalland and Persoon, 1998; 21; Weller and Hsiao 1998, Economy, 2005).

NGOs are capable of “effectively mobilising resources, appealing to citizens’ newly perceived or desired identities” (Ho and Edmonds, 2007). They do so partly by using “greenspeak” — creating new words, discourses, lifestyles and frames, circulating in the green public sphere (Harre, Brockmeier and Muhlhauser, 1999, Yang and Calhoun, 2007). Although Hubs are formally registered as businesses, and BJGH is also operating as a hostel, nevertheless the influence of Western “greenspeak” from ENGOs is highly visible and is reflected in the methods and projects that the Hubs run. The concepts of path dependence and “fresh contact” could be instrumental in understanding why young Chinese are still seeking contact with foreign experts and why the Hubs are trying to connect with Western ENGOs even if they receive no funding from them. Defined by Douglass C. North (2005; 21) path dependence is ‘the way by which institutions and beliefs derived in the past influence present choices’ refers to the process when an organisation accumulates certain institutional rules and beliefs, which it is interested in conserving (North 2005, 51–52). This section demonstrates that the process of recreating “global” and international “greenspeak” and lifestyles at the Hubs is not a result of conscious planning, but it is the reflection of the path dependency and the

“fresh contact” with environmental activism that young people have acquired, and is simply replicating the path established by the ENGOs, even if they are no longer present.

Both Hubs have English names as well as Chinese names, and many announcements are done in both languages. Many of the project souvenirs or promotional materials feature English language quotes on them, such as “Be the change you want to see in the world,” or “Think globally, act locally” - favoured by transnational NGOs and even UN agencies globally. Hub members actively seek out foreigners to give talks, host events or conduct trainings even when those foreigners do not speak Chinese, or do not seem to possess unique skills or knowledge. When the members plan projects, they often reference their experience of traveling abroad and the practices that they observed in Europe or the US. Young people choose to use international “greenspeak” and to connect with the outside world through their activism.

The Earth Day in Kunming featured European ENGO employees giving lectures on the bee extinction crisis, and a Canadian activist teaching the attendees how to plant flowers and set up roof-top gardens. Attended by over 60 young people, the event was the highlight of the year for KMGH. *“I first learned about the bees crisis from the lecture of a French researcher, and it is very important that we join the international efforts to save the bees”*, said Jin talking to KMGH members during their next meeting. *“It is very important that China is joining the international effort to combat climate change. We are happy to be a part of the world to work for the better future”*, said a male Kunming student, reflecting on the Earth Day event.

In Beijing I found that some of the students’ projects were inspired by their travel to Europe or USA. BJGH, for example, runs a recycling programme that mimics a German one, brought by a member who visited Germany. However, the issue of pollution still dominates young activists’ agenda. A male activist said: *“Whenever I go abroad, to Europe or America, I see blue skies, but in Beijing, we pollute too much, we drive cars and we don’t save energy, we need to clean up the air.”*

BJGH members are also engaged with the UNFCCC international Climate negotiations process. *“We need to be a part of the global climate movement. China is doing so much to stop climate change, and when we go to the climate conferences, every journalist wants to talk to us, young people, to connect with us and to learn. I made many international friends after I became engaged with the process”*, said a BJGH member after a talk about upcoming Conference of the Parties (COP21) in Paris given by an American scholar. I later met some of BJGH members attending

COP15 as official youth observers. They applied through the Hub, were trained by a Chinese ENGO and as a follow-up study suggests they have stayed involved with the ENGOs even after they were back from the conference — this illustrates a case of fluid transfer of these students from a non-formal engagement with the Hub to a formal engagement with an ENGO. This example shows that Hubs can serve as an easy bridge into formal ENGO sector or other charitable organisations.

While there are no formal links between the Hubs and any ENGOs neither in Kunming, nor in Beijing, on a personal level, some ENGO employees are aware of the Hubs, and have been there giving lectures, or taking part in events in a personal capacity. The events, run by foreigners that I attended in BJGH, taught the students about their environmental footprints, animal rights, and a vegan diet. These engagements drew bigger than usual crowds and the organisers said that having a foreign speaker usually increases attendance. A large animal-rights campaign that the students ran throughout their campuses, was planned in a BJGH and inspired by an American who was a vegan activist. *“When I was in California it was so easy to be a vegan, but here, on campus, you have very few options,”* she said at the meeting, to stimulate the discussion on better on-campus vegan options.

In a few weeks, I met a female student from BJGH who got inspired by that talk and decided to become vegan. She took me to her University canteen and showed several hundreds of meal option, while only a dozen or so were fully vegan. She ate steamed vegetables, while her friends were enjoying their beef noodles. *“My mum is very scared that I won’t get enough vitamins, and my friends think I am crazy, but I know that this is right. In modern countries, modern people do not eat animal products. I love that in the West people are very humane, they have compassion for animals”*, she said then. When I saw her again in six months, there were over 30 vegan options in the canteen, as the result of the Hub-coordinated campaign, and a full table of her friends was eating vegan<sup>23</sup>.

Some of my contacts even connected the need to meet and make friends with foreigners to building a better China. *“We, the generation of the 1990s, are the new blood of China. We can make China a new international country. This is why we need to learn English, and we need to meet more foreigners”*, said a KMGH member.

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<sup>23</sup> As I mentioned earlier, my contacts tended to idealise Western countries and for the purposes of achieving the research objectivity I did not interfere with their imaginations.

In many conversations, the students expressed that they wish to take examples from and be closer to the environmental movement in the West. This is consistent with Malfrid and Rolandsen's observation that young Chinese perceived volunteering in Hong-Kong and USA as best examples of activism (2010;152). My contacts chose these foreign activists as their role models and tried to recreate the projects they did and the lifestyles they led.

*"I met a guy from Ireland who has helped to build a shelter for a Tibetan monk who was taking care of orphans. And there are a lot of foreigners like him who come to help, educate women about their rights, save our rivers, and nature. I find that foreigners want to help Chinese people and I also want to make Chinese people care for each other and our environment."*

*Han, leader of an environment and community development project at KMGH, Interview, 2014, Kunming.*

It has been noted that university-based societies are overly bureaucratic and it is hard for students to obtain permission to conduct any activity on campus (Mangoldt, 2016). The openness of the Hubs to all people, including foreigners plays a big role in their success- the culture is friendly, many people can speak English, there are no formal requirements or fees to join, and one can attend as many or as little events as one wishes, all that is required is signing up for a WeChat group. In contrast to hierarchical and inaccessible University-based clubs, Hubs make it very easy for a foreign passer-by lecturer or an ENGO worker to come by and run a workshop.

This openness, global orientation and no-pressure environment show that structurally Hubs resemble small ENGOs relieved of the pressure to fundraise, rather than University-based clubs. Perhaps, because of the "fresh contact" of the current Chinese generation who were born into the environmental discourse being championed by the Western-driven ENGOs, young people feel that if they want to do environmental projects, they need to tap into the global "greenspeak" and invite Western experts. Even if the ENGOs who started those discourses are no longer active, the millennials that run the Hubs' path-dependency and use global "greenspeak" to communicate their messages. Young people feel that joining the cause can make them part of something larger, bring them closer to foreigners, and by extension to the world outside China.

After we finished watching *Under the Dome* in Ming's apartment, the students asked what they could do about air pollution. *"If we could learn from countries that had already managed to*

*overcome this challenge, China would be a much safer place to live,”* said a young man, who I saw for the first time. *“You should come to the Hub with us next week. A guy from the USA will give a presentation about forests, so you can ask him what to do about the air too”*, responded Ming.

### **Environmental activism as a lifestyle choice**

Environmental activism of the current post-foreign-funding generation that I encountered can be described as apolitical and manifests itself through a form of “lifestyle activism” that is practiced by young people individually and Hubs as collectives. In her study of environmental student activists in Indonesia, Tsing noticed that depoliticization of their activism did not simply imply that students were disinterested in national politics, rather, it was a self-conscious quiescence and withdrawal from traditional politics (Tsing, 2011). The “resigned activism” concept, by Anna Lora-Wainwright, reconciles the apparent lack of political engagement with activism in her case studies through the efforts people undertake routinely, individually or as a group, to counter or avoid pollution. It also refers to the simultaneous processes through which pollution comes to be regarded as a normal and unavoidable part of the natural environment.

In both cities, Kunming and Beijing, I have found young people were internalising the responsibility for environmental degradation, and they were looking up to the government to tell them what they could do. They were genuinely surprised why the government would censor certain things, like the documentary *Under the Dome*.

*“I don’t understand why this movie was taken down by the government,”* asked one student ten minutes into the film, *“it is not at all critical of the government, and we need to know how we all can improve the situation with air pollution. If they don’t teach us what to do, what are we to do (怎么办 zenmeban)?”*. This question, *zenmeban*, was very often on the minds of my contacts, although all of them said that they were not interested in politics, and didn’t see anything that they did as a “political” act.

Some of my Kunming contacts grew up in poor villages, and can also remember how Kunming has changed in the years since their families moved to the city, and that the places that were considered to be rural, now boast university campuses.

*“There was a river next to our university. When I was a girl, I was able to fish there with my father. Now, there is no fish. The river is so polluted that nothing can survive there.*

*Also, my grandma used to collect wild mushrooms. But now the environment is very bad, the mushrooms are rare, and very expensive. We need to save our nature and we need to eat more mindfully.”*

Zhang, a third-year student of economics and KMGH member.

Zhang now runs a re-wilding project with KMGH, and organises tree planting and promotes urban farming and biodiversity among her friends.

In Beijing, the issue on everyone’s mind was air pollution. This could be explained by the fact that when the students were young, Beijing was already a megacity without forests or wildlife. *“People drive too many cars, we consume too much, and we use too much energy- this is why our air is so dirty,”* a BJGH activist said. The blame attributed to those responsible for air pollution was consistent with governmental discourse and official media messages on the contribution of individual citizens’ lifestyles to pollution (Fedorenko & Sun, 2015). Beijing Hub is indeed active in promoting energy-efficiency and sustainable resource use.

I found that young people were taking responsibility for the environmental damage, and took actions to counter it. Some actions were one-off campaigns, such as picking up litter or tree-planting on campus or roofs. However, one constant trend which would make activist differ from their peers was consumption. One of the forms of such activism that could be easily observed by following young people engaged with the Hubs on a daily basis is activism consumption. Hai Ren (in Anagnost, 2013, p.30) argue that one of the major ways through which an ordinary Chinese individual becomes subject to the regulation of the middle-class norm is consumption.

In Beijing, those patterns were more sophisticated, and young people expressed their “green” identities by buying reusable bags with environmental messaging and following vegan diets. Beijing contacts were very mindful of what they were buying and where, and what carbon footprint those things would have. In Kunming, where the market for sustainably produced goods was not that developed, activists would demonstrate their identities through eating out in western restaurants. For example, one foreigner-run cafe was hiring women from the villages, paying them fair wages, and sourcing some of its’ products from their farms. My contacts would often go there to drink farm-grown tea and buy extremely expensive honey, knowing that it came from small-holder farmers.

Reusable chopsticks and canvas bags instead of plastic bags were also important attributes of an environmental activist in both cities. One consumption and lifestyle trend that students would

proudly tell me about in Kunming and Beijing was using plastic lunch boxes instead of paper plates in their universities' canteen.

*“I thought that this is better for the environment and also saves me money. First, the canteen ladies were annoyed with me when I would ask them to use my bowl instead of their paper dishes, but now they are accustomed to it. My friends also thought that I was silly because I need to spend time washing the bowl after every meal, instead of throwing it away. But after I told them how much money it saves me a month, they are all doing it. And now I see that they are also learning about new things and start caring for the environment. I already introduced two of them to the Hub.”*

Xiaogang, a third-year student in Kunming.

Similar stories were by vegan activists in Beijing Hub. *“I cannot have compassion for animals, follow a vegan diet and pollute nature at the same time. My self and all my friend use reusable lunch boxes”,* said Sheng. Each time when there was food at the Hub meeting it was sustainably sourced or vegan, the students went an extra mile to find such products and wash cups after the event. This form of lifestyle activism could be compared to the Western movement of sustainable consumption or vegan activists who manifest their identities by supporting ethically-driven brands with their purchases.

The second Western trend that my contacts got engaged with through the Hubs is “voluntourism”- volunteering abroad for good causes. While still being a minority, some of my contacts already have traveled to help in nature conservation and in farming, building and educational project for less fortunate across China and abroad. Students from Yunnan have often reported going to poor villages near the picturesque city of Guilin and in Sichuan province, as well as to other countries: Thailand, Cambodia, and Myanmar. For example, one second-year student went to volunteer in Sri Lanka, after her friend from the Hub recommended her a good travel agency that placed her with a local NGO. *“I want to see the world, but I want also to be useful. I don't want to go on bus tours with other Chinese people. I want to meet real people outside China”,* said a KMGH member. Beijing contacts had more opportunities to travel, and they were also going to environmental conferences and capacity building programs in Europe, however, they also told stories about going to poorer Western provinces of China and taking part in biodiversity preservation camps in Hainan.

While the level of engagement is different for different people, all of them were active members of the Hub's WeChat groups. Some projects I have followed took part exclusively online, such as fundraising or resource mobilisation for environmental causes, petitions for animal rights or distribution of environmental health information. The green public sphere that the activists are constructing provides them not only with the networks but also with a sense of belonging to a larger group, which as many contacts said, was the most important factor in their continuous involvement with the Hubs.

However, the control over public mobilisation in China became so tight in the past few years, and all my contacts were aware of internet censorship and knew very well what shall and shall not be said. *"We do not protest online, and we do not say anything bad about the government. Even if you are writing in English, they can still check what you write. But I don't mind because I am not saying anything wrong"*, told me a BJGH member. *"The Government will read your messages, and they will go after your friends and family if you will openly motivate people to protest,"* told me a Kunming University teacher and once a leader of environmental protests. The current students express no desire to organise mass social actions and they use WeChat to connect to other members of the Hubs, to curate group chats and to share the news about interesting events, or project opportunities, it seemed that the Hub members were not interested in politics and never thought about their activism as anything political. Sometimes they even acted as bridges between the informal Hub sector and more formal structures, such as Universities, local governments, NGOs, churches and travel agencies. Larry Isaac (2010) speaks about coalition brokers, who act as bridges, identify social movements, reach out to motivate by engaging in frame alignment processes (Van Dyke and McCammon eds. 2010). Hubs therefore could provide the platform for the next generation of environmental activists to become such bridge-builders and create coalitions between different sectors and stakeholders. Besides, through the use of social media, Hub members make isolated "greenspeak" more mainstream, and employ non-confrontational frames to depoliticise environmental activism.

Over a year of regular attendance, I didn't hear much of Government's critique or political dissent. My contacts were acutely aware of the lack of freedom to protest, but on the other side, they did not believe in protests. Commenting on anti-PX factory protests in 2014 in Kunming, Jin recalled that *"students were locked on campus. If we didn't come to class, teachers would ask where we were. And we would have a serious talk with the teacher. We could not write anything on the Internet, and we had to stay on campus. But I don't think that people would have gone anyway. We all know that protests don't change anything"*.

Students sounded compassionate towards the Government and wanted to help them succeed in making China cleaner: *“Our the country is so big - it is very hard for the Government to clean it up. I know that they don't do their job properly, but I think they really try. We should help them”*, said a male BJGH member. I have found these attitude prevailing among young people in both cities. Their comments and actions suggested that they have little faith in the government, but at the same time, they also felt that it is their duty to help the government to combat pollution. They did it by changing their individual lifestyles, engaging in various campaigns and advocacy on a personal level, collectively as Hub members or part of other clubs off-line and online. This research highlighted that Chinese millennials respond to the pressure to do something useful with their time y by engaging with the Hubs and these bring benefits which may not be immediately obvious, but include making connections, feeling part of a global citizenry and feeling a part of the group of peers by creating a green identity.

## **Conclusion**

While the public space for civil society has decreased in China in the recent years, new forms of activism are emerging and attract young people who are passionate about environmental causes but do not have the opportunity to join domestic ENGOs or international movements. This paper identifies new structures that emerged in the absence of ENGOs to engage young people in environmental activism — city Hubs. The research described two such Hubs, in Kunming and Beijing, and attempted to show how young people engage with them, and how these serve as a platform for students to contribute to the causes they choose.

Using extensive fieldwork and interviews, the research attempted to uncover the motivation of volunteers to engage with the Hubs. The study showed that those Chinese millennials that make time in their busy schedules to attend the Hubs are attracted to an environmental cause, because they can have an impact, and want to do something good for nature and society, while not being constrained by official structures. Through the Hubs, they feel part of the “global citizenry” and the new generation of 2010+ activists, that stretches beyond the national borders. Hubs use “green-speak” to appeal to their members, invite foreign speakers and ask Western experts to conduct capacity-building exercises. These processes have been established by the previous generation of Western funders, but now are driven by the recipients themselves who follow path dependency, even if they do not receive the funding from abroad. At the same time this allows young people to

connect with foreigners via the Hubs - an opportunity harder to come by in University-based societies.

I argued that the contact of Chinese millennials with environmental activism was foreign and apolitical, therefore they can reconcile being part of a global environmental discourse and at the same time to stay patriotic. Young people also use Hubs as part of their life-making strategy to achieving their career goals and benefiting from study-abroad programs. In Beijing, they can benefit from the networks and skills acquired at the Hubs by finding jobs and internships to a larger extent than in Kunming. Despite all the pressures, these young people have a broad sense of what benefit means, and this involvement with environmentalism helps in widening their life experience and allows them to feel good about themselves by volunteering. Being able to do so is a form of privilege, and they think that during their time at the University it is the only chance to engage in something they are interested in instead of having to focus on earning money and supporting a family. Therefore Hubs, with their fluid structure and no minimum requirement of engagement and absence of bureaucracy are well-suited for mobilising this new generation of post-foreign-funding environmental activists.

The forms of “lifestyle activism” that I observed in the post-foreign-funding civil society were consistent with apolitical “embedded activism” and non-confrontation “resigned activism” suggested by other researchers. While the impacts of all these activities on the future of Chinese civil society are not clear, they paint a picture of urban unofficial youth environmental activism centred around city Hubs, which could become platforms for a new generation of bridge builders and coalition brokers.

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## **Chapter 5 (Paper IV)**

### **Recycling Communism: environmental activism and youth movements in modern Russia**

#### **Abstract**

Russian civil society has started from environmental movements, and was supported by western donors who established more non-governmental organisations (NGOs) to stimulate further democratisation and post-communist transition. Such foreign support along with a number of limiting factors has resulted in creating an isolated civil society that has been facing gradual crack-downs since 2006. After the enactment by the Russian government of the 2012 “foreign agent” law, association with the west has become a liability, forcing many NGOs to close down or relocate. This paper argues that a new generation of youth-led environmental movement is taking root in modern Russia, and analyses the new forms of environmentalism, the legacy of foreign funding, and the influence of the Soviet-time structures on it. This research uses two youth-led environmental movements in Vladivostok and Moscow as case studies in order to provide an insight into the new emerging “post-foreign-funding” civil society in Russia.

Submitted to Russian Politics.

#### **Introduction**

Civil society has been described as “a space of citizen-directed collective action, located between the family and the state” (Henry & Sundstrom, 2006b, p. 5), consisting in part of formally organised groups such as non-governmental organisations (NGOs) as well as of informal movements. Russian civil society, which starts its history from the emergence of environmental movements in the late 1980s has been traditionally labelled as weak, underfunded and fragmented, with a relatively limited number of NGOs and an absence of active civic engagement (Crotty, 2003). Chaisty and Whitefield (2013) argued that contemporary Russia has a ‘hybrid regime’, which combines democratic and authoritarian elements and led to Russian civil society to differ from the traditional western understanding of the concept. Those complex challenges that Russian civil society faces include political constraints, poor access to information, low levels of political awareness, Soviet legacy, and a working culture that favours bureaucratic top-down solutions to public problems

and lately state-sponsored attempts to curtail independent civil society (Busse Spencer, 2011; Crotty, 2009; Evans, 2012; Semenova, 2006; Sundstrom, 2005).

It has been argued that international support can help NGOs impact policy by providing further pressure on domestic governments, and in Russia, transnational advocacy networks have impacted the emergence and activities of NGOs through the provision of support, technical assistance, and funding (Henderson, 2011; Keck and Sikkink 1998). For one example of such influence, the contact between Russian environmental leaders and westerners has increased tenfold between 1991-1998, and by the beginning of the 21st century, approximately 75% of financial resources of Russian environmental NGOs (ENGOS) came from the West (Henry, 2001).

However, despite its contribution to the development of modern Russian civil society, western funding has become a source of challenges for civil society development. It was suggested that following western-specific goals made Russian ENGOS less effective, and that western funding while supporting ENGOS, might undermine civic development and discourage groups from functioning as a civil society (Henderson, 2003; Sundstrom, 2005). The domination of western thinking within Russian ENGOS has meant that few organisations aimed to widen popular participation, as they mainly set their agendas to try to please donors and encourage further investment (Crotty, 2003). In some cases, the donors also insisted that grantees follow what they prescribe as “best practice,” based on the business model of scheduling, budgeting, and impersonal task-oriented interactions (Drucker, 1990). Given the differences in organisational logic, a “professionalised” group that adopts western business-like styles can seem “foreign” in Russia even if it doesn’t adopt western goals (Hemment, 2007). Therefore the reliance of Russian civil society on overseas donor funding has had the opposite effect to what was intended (Henry, 2001; Henderson, 2003; Crotty, 2003; Sundstrom, 2005). Rather than bolstering its development, overseas funding has created a class of NGO that is distanced from the Russian society, and thus it has ‘widened the gap between activists and the rest of society’ (Henderson 2002, p. 75).

The colour revolutions in Ukraine and Georgia, which had clear aspects of conventional civil society to them, led to President Putin’s Administration imposing new restrictions on NGOs and forced them to register with the Russian government if they wish to continue operations (Beissinger et al., 2012). It is argued that through this more repressive approach reflected in legislative policy, President Putin is able to selectively encourage certain NGOs and punish and repress those whose who he sees as threatening, such as political and human rights organisations in order to diminish the

influence of international funding (Evans, 2012; Henderson, 2011). The 2012 law passed by the Russian Government, compelling a wide range of organisations which received funding from abroad to register as “foreign agents” faced direct resistance as no organisation signed up to this register, forcing the new 2014 amendment to follow, that enabled the government to place them on the register without their permission (Lanskoy, 2014). The western-style, professionalised NGOs that have an adversarial relationship with the state have been largely run into the ground, while only small and apolitical or government-affiliated organisations have been able to continue operations.

However, despite these challenges, the new generation of environmental grassroots movement<sup>24</sup> has emerged in Russia and is making its way to shape the new “post-foreign-funding” civil society. Youth-led groups, which unite multiple environmental projects and networks are operating all over the country today. They work on issues ranging from sustainability education to recycling, to wildlife protection and to environmental protests. They have different forms of organisations and registration, with most of them operating informally. They are united by the common cause — environmental protection and by the fact that all their projects are voluntary and depend on the goodwill of their members. Some of these groups have already impacted policies, such as recycling on a municipal level, lobbied for bicycle roads on university campuses and stopped polluting industries - they could be shaping Russian civil society of tomorrow. This paper deals with the complex factors that shaped this movement and analyses the frames and discourses they use to recruit members. This research contributes to the debate on path dependence of social organisations and the influence of foreign funding on environmental movements in the countries in transition. In doing so, it develops the “embedded activism” theory by exploring how depoliticising of environmental politics takes place in Russian youth-led movements.

I argue that the because western donors were trying to distance themselves from the soviet heritage of collective voluntarism, the ENGOs they created lacked membership support and have become vulnerable to the political change. The youth-led groups in the modern Russia are more successful in mixing Soviet messages with the global and international discourses to make the environmental cause appealing to larger audiences. I use case studies from two cities with the legacy of western-funded environmental movements Moscow and Vladivostok. An insight into their anti-waste and recycling campaigns presents an opportunity to compare the cases and to illustrate those

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<sup>24</sup> I use Escobar’s definitions of grassroots environmental movements as «historical subjects struggling for the reappropriation of their natures and the redefinition of their identities», and Dalton’s definition of environmental interest groups as “ongoing, institutionalised advocates for political action that reach beyond the concerns of a specific locale”. (Dalton, 1994; 14; Escobar, 1998; 388)

movements. This study focuses on the place in-between officially sanctioned university-based activism and ENGO engagement. While the structures for official student participation are still in place, I argue that the new youth-led environmental movements are following path-dependence established by the Soviet organisations, while using the framing of the ENGOs to attract new members and lobby their causes.

This paper will first analyse the legacy of western-funded ENGOs, the path dependence on the Soviet structure, and will then proceed to describe and compare the “post-foreign-funding” environmental movement and finish by examining their strategies to recruit members and to run their campaigns.

## **Methodology**

The purpose of this research is to uncover the processes, describe the stakeholders, tools and framing strategies for the “post-foreign-funding” civil society mobilisation. To achieve this, I needed to capture the “social meanings and ordinary activities” of informants in “naturally occurring settings” that are commonly referred to as “the field” (Brewer, 2002). Therefore I conducted several field visits to Vladivostok and Moscow during 2014/2015 to meet activists of environmental movements and the people who identified themselves as such. Scholarship has shown that St Petersburg and Moscow while remaining the most influential cities in Russia, ought not to be seen as representative of Russia as a whole (Gilbert, 2016).

Therefore Vladivostok has been chosen as a second location due to its status of the biodiversity hotspot, and the presence of international ENGOs in it (Sun and Tysiachniouk, 2008). Being a part of an environmental movement in Russia in the past has provided me with extensive networks among civil society activists, which allowed me to access relevant group meetings. Case studies have been carried out in both cities, and although one cannot generalise from a case, it can nevertheless serve as an illustration and generate understanding of environmental activism (Flyvbjerg, 2006; Castree, 2005; Xie, 2007: 62).

In Vladivostok, I have conducted 30 interviews and 11 participant observations of the meetings of youth-led organisations and spoke to over 50 people. In Moscow, I spoke to more than 60 people and conducted 30 in-depths interviews, and took part in 6 events through participant observation. Most of my participants were young people born between 1984-1992, and all of them had higher education. I took into account the fact that registration of non-profit is cumbersome in

Russia, and therefore considered environmental movements as non-registered groups working for the environmental cause.

Moscow university students came from across Russia and different walks of life, and similar representation could be argued for Vladivostok university students. They are generally more representative of the Russian Far East region as they come from all walks of life to attend the university whereas the other universities across the region are more demographic snapshots of their region in particular (Lindstrom, 2010; 62). Both cities are quite cosmopolitan, although it can be argued that Moscow students are generally more connected with Europe, and Vladivostok students spent more time in Asia. Given their distance from European Russia (7 time zones), remoteness with respect to major urban centres, and 4,300 kilometres of shared border with China, residents of the Russian Far East cities most likely to spend most time abroad in Asia, including advanced democracies of Japan and South Korea (Lindstrom, 2010; 62).

Semi-structured in-depth interviews and original surveys had been conducted with environmental activists to understand their goals and political positions and how they engage in environmentalism. Thematic analyses had been used to analyse the interviews and participant observations were used to uncover the work of NGOs in both cities. Focus groups have been conducted with NGO members to understand the barriers and challenges they face in their campaigns, the ways they communicate with various stakeholders.

This research analyses the rhetoric and resources of communicative language and frames used by environmental activists to communicate with various stakeholders (Eagleton, 1991; Foucault, 1972; Habermas, 1987; Mertha, 2010; Johnson, 2010). Framing conceptualised by Goffman as an “everyday sense-making technique” makes events meaningful and thereby functions to organise experience and guide action (Benford and Snow 2000; Creed et al., 2002:36).

## **The role of foreign-funding on NGOs during the post-communist transition period in Russia.**

Environmental problems of the Russian Federation are multi-faceted and complex, partly due to the legacy of the Soviet Union. Environmental policy of the former Soviet Union is often described as “anthropocentric and functionalist” (O’Lear, 1997), and the issues inherited from that period include high energy and resource consuming industry; obsolete industrial structure and technology; heavy pollution and limited information to the general public about the state of the environment (Verbitskaya et al. 2002; 178). After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the internal political turmoil in Russia left environmental issues out of agenda, while various small and medium-sized ENGOs started to appear, supported by the western grants in order to tackle those issues.

Crotty (2006) argues that the environmental movement groups in Russia fall into “a space between state and society, rather than bridging the gap in-between”, and because this space is so thin, the shape of the civil society looks like an hourglass with the State on the top, society in the bottom, and NGOs as a small bridge in-between (ibid.:1335). The reasons for such limited civil society are manifold, and range from poverty to distrust in foreign structures. Experienced by many as a result of ‘shock therapy’ with a peak of rural poverty at 73.1% in 1999, it led to the lack of time and inclination to campaign for distant issues (Mamonova & Visser, 2014; Crotty, 2003). Besides, forced participation in mass voluntary activities such as clean-up campaigns (*subbotnik*) demanded during the Soviet era has contributed to an active response against present involvement, with membership in voluntary organisations not seeming progressive but a feature of the previous era (Crotty, 2003). Outside of the major metropolitan areas, NGOs are thinly stretched, and there are few incentives to encourage a professionalized staff to fill the NGOs, as citizens rarely chose the nonprofit sector as a career choice with the number of people involved in at about 1 percent of Russian adult population (Henderson, 2011).

Despite these challenges, the third sector has seen exponential growth in the number of ENGOs. Russian environmental movements, joined the global network of movements and transnational organisations in the 1990s, making them part of the larger global process (Henry 2006, 2010; Mamonova & Visser, 2014; Tysiachniouk, 2010). Based on surveys of green activists, Russian sociologists have argued that contacts between Russian environmental leaders and westerners have increased ten times between 1991 and 1998, and that about 75 percent of the financial resources of ENGOs in the late 1990’s came from the West (Kouzmina and Yanitsky, 1999: 180). The most ob-

vious contribution of foreign donors to Russian NGOs was the funding they provided through grant competitions, and it has to be acknowledged that without foreign funding, Russian NGOs would have a very difficult time continuing their activities (Henry, 2001).

However, the desire of donors to quickly create western style pluralism through support for NGOs led them to encourage the emulation and proliferation of the Western NGO model by financing particular projects and by demanding certain types of organisational forms (a board of directors, open membership, transparent decision-making) and financial accountability in return, while these priorities didn't always match with the most pressing environmental issues, and didn't resonate with the majority of the population. Arguably, this has created distance between the public and undermined organisations' ability to strengthen civil society and contribute to democratisation in Russia (Henry, 2001). My contacts among the donors who were working in Russia in the late 1990s said that they were aspiring to build a western-style democracy as they were describing various seminars and capacity building programmes. *"We wanted to show people how they can receive grants for building a more democratic civil society. The participants would often ask why would we, Americans, want to give money to them. But we would always say that by supporting their projects, we are creating peaceful neighbours"*, said a former programme manager of Winrock International.

Externally introduced donors' framing strategies might have diverted the environmental movement from the issues of local concern and lessened its likelihood of success. Most Russian ENGOs are not membership-based, and few organisations engage in community outreach and express interest in more locally rooted problems, such as polluted lakes and streams, refuse in parks, uncontrolled stray pet populations, and health problems related to industrial pollution (Henry, 2001). While donors have succeeded in promoting the survival and growth of ENGOs in Russia, it has been difficult for these organisations to form links with their local communities and to influence environmental policy (Henry, 2001).

There were multiple benefits of donor funding, including democracy building and the development of civil society, the fostering of more democratic NGOs, and the assisting of NGOs in achieving their goals through grant-assisted projects and actions (Henderson, 2011). These factors have created contention between the small class of civil society activists, the majority of the population and the government, which has become apparent after 2006, when the government started to manage NGOs proactively.

Henderson (2011) argues that Putin administration's strategy was to design a complex of policies that reward "good" behaviour for NGOs whose advocacy originates out of performing valuable social services that have the potential to improve the social and economic well-being of the population. The legislative policy also provides enough stipulations that the administration now has the capability of punishing NGOs that pursue issues about which it is less than enthusiastic, which many argue is related to political rights and liberties (ibid). It has been suggested that the 2006 NGO law led to an overall reduction in NGO activity and the domination of the remaining activity by organisations funded and controlled by the Russian State (Gilbert, 2016).

The Foreign Agent Law on the regulation of activities of NGOs has been in effect since November 2012, initiated by the ruling party United Russia, and actively promoted by President Vladimir Putin. It states that non-profit organisations throughout Russia are required to list themselves as foreign agents when receiving grants from foreign sources, to avoid 'any direct or indirect interference in [Russia's] internal affairs' (Pierk and Tysiachniouk, 2016). It has been estimated that since the adoption of the law, more than 2000 NGOs have been investigated and accompanied by a defamation campaign in the media, which described NGOs as a "fifth column" subsidised by the west (Volkov, 2014). This made political climate intolerable for many NGOs and while environmental organisations are relatively apolitical, and are excluded from the list of "foreign agents," the whole landscape for civil society has shifted in the recent years. This paper argues that Russian civil society is entering a new era of post-foreign-funding and analyses the new forms of environmental movements that are emerging in the absence of ENGOS.

### **Soviet heritage and civil society in modern Russia**

The legacy of the Soviet Union still casts a shadow over the development of Russian civil society, as it continues to shape the societal structure and the propensity of individuals to engage with social movements and other civic organisations. It is argued that most Russian NGOs are influenced by cultural legacies of patronage, Soviet-style collectives, and group boundaries (Busse Spencer, 2011; 1073). It is argued that deep-rooted mindsets stemming from the Soviet and even tsarist era that led to the distrust in official structures were not conducive to building an independent civil society (Lansky, 2014;1). This resistance to the third sector is compounded by another element of the Soviet legacy: the idea that it is the state's responsibility to 'solve every problem,' 'social individualism' has been described by some NGO leaders as the most important factor in the decreased membership of advocacy groups Crotty (2003). While western donors expected that with

the new freedom of association and new funding, Russians would automatically choose behaviours that supported western-style democratic society, the legacies of tsarist and Soviet-era culture have proved remarkably resilient (Busse Spencer, 2011).

In this context, the Soviet Union's approach to civic activity remains a topic of debate within the literature, with some scholars viewing Soviet civil society as 'historically weak' or 'oppressed' and actively removed from society (Crotty, 2003; Woolcock, 1998). Others contend that Soviet civil society was not weak, but 'institutionalised' (Mishler & Rose 1997; Hartner 1998). Mamanova and Visser (2014), for example, argue that movements can both cooperate with the state while being able to preserve a certain degree of autonomy and through this can be more efficient. This argument is reflective of the "embedded activism" model that Ho and Edmonds developed in the Chinese context (2008). They argued that Chinese ENGOs operate within existing governmental institutions and align their framing to the official discourses in order to be able to continue their operations. Taking into account the legacy of the Soviet Union and its influence on the development of modern Russian civil society, it would be possible to assume that this would be reflected in the donors' strategies. However, from my interviews it was apparent, that western donors and their grantees have chosen to distance themselves from the Soviet discourse and create a separate class of environmentalists.

*"Back in the nineties, we just didn't want to do anything with the ENGOs that would remind people of the USSR — it was too soon. We were building the new world, we were building the new democratic Russia",* said a German grant-making foundation employee (Interview, Moscow, 2014). In the framing of their activities, as well as in the advice on organisational structure donors were trying to avoid any connotations with the Soviet Union. *"The problem with the Russian environmental movement is that their leaders were too Soviet, too scientific. They came from the Academy of Science or Universities, and they used a different language so they couldn't connect with the population,"* said a grant-distributing officer of an environmental fund (Interview, Vladivostok, 2015). *"I found Russian ENGOs to be very insulated; I think this is because of the Soviet-time fear and distrust, when people were afraid of their neighbours."* said a programme assistant of a support organisation for environmental groups, who was working in Vladivostok and Moscow in the 1990s (Interview, Skype, 2015). The associations with the Soviet-time members-based organisations has led ENGOs to distance themselves which have arguably hindered the movement's development.

*“We always provided advice to our grantees, but I cannot recall a single time when somebody would ask about the recruitment of new members or how to increase their public engagement — they were just not interested in mass public mobilisation, it was too Soviet for them”,* said a programme officer of an American foundation (Interview, Moscow, 2014). Another donor mentioned that they didn’t want to prioritise recruitment, as they needed to build multiple ENGOs first.

*“We knew that these organisations needed new members to be sustainable, but we just didn’t want to have Soviet connotations - membership was a Communist Party structure. The recipients would say that their organisations are fluid and they didn’t want us to push structures on them. We just didn’t want to have anything that would resemble the Soviet Union.”*

Programme assistant of an American environmental fund (Interview, Moscow, 2015)

My contacts have also noted the desire of Russian people to connect with the wider world, to learn from the west, and study or even move abroad, and that in some cases they would get involved with the ENGOs to achieve these goals. *“Many people would join to have the opportunity to find out about grants and scholarships or other migration options, so sadly, I think we have contributed to brain drain on the Post-Soviet territory,”* said an American donor (Interview, Moscow, 2015). While it is hard to find hard data on the number of ENGO workers who have gone abroad because of their work, anecdotal evidence and my interviews suggest that the proportion of people who have left is quite significant.

Speaking to the forestry scientists in Moscow who have been working with US-based ENGOs, I learned that many people saw that collaboration as a path to immigration at the time when Russian science was underfunded. and it was impossible to survive without foreign grants. *“Once you start going abroad for different events, once you see that in normal countries a scientist can have a good standard of life by just working average hours, you understand that you need to leave...ENGO networks can help you find jobs or study programs abroad”* (Interview, Moscow, 2014). Most of my contacts from this generation of environmental activists were either pessimistic about Russia, wanted to leave or have indeed moved abroad. While this situation is perhaps reflective of the general “brain drain” trend after the collapse of the Soviet Union and is unique to ENGO, close connections with the west and networks with foreign funders might have encouraged this tendency and attracted criticism of their activities.

However, at the time of my fieldwork, I have noticed new tendencies. While at professional gatherings the pioneers of Russian civil society complained that the Soviet mindset of the population — the apathy and the lack of interest in politics — are the main limits to its development, they also expressed hope in the future generations. *“Mindsets don’t change, but social arrangements do. If NGOs will have more young people, will depend on youth, young people will be able to raise questions on decision-making, participation, and will bring about democratic change.”* (Experts’ speech at Salzburg Global Seminar on Russian Civil Society, 2014).

*There is a rise of civic activism in Russia, and it is not just driven by incorporated NGOs, new informal groups and activists are emerging. And non-Soviet Russians are the leading force in it, and I think they are making the difference. Russia will not forever remain a paternalistic nation, because young people are changing it.*

Journalist and a programme officer of an EU foundation (Speech, Salzburg, 2014).

In the light of the above, it is crucial to analyse which path the new generation of environmental activists would follow: the Soviet path of volunteering organisations, or the western-style of small professionalised ENGOs. The concept of path dependence is instrumental in directing the next section of this paper. It is defined as ‘the way by which institutions and beliefs derived in the past influence present choices’ (Douglass C. North, 2005; 21). Any organisation accumulates certain institutional rules and beliefs, which it is interested in conserving if those institutions and beliefs are necessary for the organisation’s survival (North 2005, 51–52). The next section will look into this emerging “post-foreign-funding” civil society and analyse its framing in relations to Soviet and western ideals, as well as its capacity to bring about democratic change.

### **Environmental youth movements in Moscow and Vladivostok**

The focus of the current study are young environmental activists from Vladivostok and Moscow, and the two environmental movements they have created — UniGreen in Moscow and VLGreen in Vladivostok. The respondents of my study were born during or shortly after the year the Soviet Union collapsed, and as Lindstrom (2010; 64) described this demographic they “attended kindergarten at the time of Yeltsin's re-election as President of Russia (1995-96), and were completing 5th grade when Putin ascended to the Presidency...thus were too young to have experienced Soviet Communism and too young to have as of yet formally participated in democratic Russia”.

At university those young people who were looking to contribute to social and environmental causes and wanted to get engaged in some extra-curriculum activities have encountered various

clubs and societies, which included organisations that were founded in the Soviet times as well as new structures. Russia has a long-standing history of Soviet self-organised student organisations and traditionally, the student-led organisations such as student unions and Komsomol, engaged in officially sanctioned campaigning and helped in achieving the governmental/university administration goals (Chirikov and Gruzdev, 2014). With the collapse of the Soviet Union, those organisations have either disappeared or lost in their significance, although many of the structures are still in place. Chirikov and Gruzdev's (2014) study of professional student unions showed that they were similar to other types of Soviet organisations and created visibility of representation and that the patterns of behaviour of the student union members were repeated from generation to generation, forging the path for student representation formed during the Soviet times, that can still be seen nowadays. It can be argued, that the current youth environmental movements have another path established for them by the previous generation of foreign-funded ENGOs. The empirical findings below will answer the question where these movements tend to turn if the foreign funding is not in place.

VLGreen was established in 2009 on the premises of Vladivostok University by the students who have already been active in other student organisations and independent foreign-funded NGOs. The movement has sprung out from an education for sustainable development project by another University-based youth organisation, which was supported by a Canadian charitable foundation. The project involved over 500 students in Vladivostok, and encouraged young people to form the core of the new organisation, that has grown to encompass 12 grass-roots movements by 2010. The projects by VLGreen and its members included sustainability education programmes, arts events, clean-up campaigns, tree planting, academic events, and political lobbying for better environmental infrastructure. In the beginning, the movement has been receiving small grants for small projects that came from USAID and the American Consulate. After 2011, the foreign funding has been substituted by the administrative support of Vladivostok City Administration and local universities.

In 2012, in Moscow UniGreen had successfully lobbied a university to establish a new centre for green economy, which later became to serve as a hub for student environmental groups and the UniGreen base. Founded by a student who came back from doing a master's in sustainability in Europe, the movement now spans 5 universities and reaches out to the network of several thousand people. UniGreen runs academic activities and high-profile governmental events like international conferences, but also engages with students in Moscow through sustainability education and recycling campaigns.

Both VLGreen and UniGreen put a great emphasis on membership, and each organisation does recruitment through their networks and large events. *“People is the main resource that we have. If we have no people, we have nothing. We have to be very careful of not scaring them away, and constantly supporting their motivation”*, said the head of UniGreen. *“Do you know how to determine if the organisation is rich or poor? The wealth is not in the organisation’s bank account, but it is in the quality of its people. If we have good people, we are wealthy and we can achieve anything”*, said the leader of VLGreen. Since the goals that the organisations set for them selves do not require funding, they were able to source most of their needs through human and administrative resources. Therefore the number of members and their motivations were key to movement’s success.

Recruitment of new members had clear Soviet connotations to the organisers: *“It is like a new Komsomol<sup>25</sup>, but a green Komsomol, with good ideology. All of us are here for the same reason - we care for the same cause, and the students have free time, so we are harnessing their potential to contribute to do something good”* (Interview, Moscow, 2015). From my interviews with the participants, I found that in both cities, students join the organisations because they were interested in finding new friends and wanted to contribute to the society. *“I was a fresher, I just came from Nakhodka, so I was new to Vladivostok, and I needed to socialise...I joined VLGreen because I found that it worked for the improvement of our nature and our community and I wanted to do something useful”* (Interview, Vladivostok, 2014). A female activist in UniGreen said: *“I was new in Moscow and I wanted to find friends, to integrate into the university. I found this work really rewarding because we are doing something useful”* (Interview, Moscow, 2015).

Another important factor was to connect with the world, to become a part of something bigger. *“I was driven by the desire to learn about the world. I wanted to meet people outside of my circle and I was interested in meeting foreigners too”*, said a female participant of VLGreen (Interview, Vladivostok, 2014). The involvement in the movements, has enabled the participants to take part in international conferences, workshops, and capacity-building exercises. In terms of purposes of travel; I found that students from Moscow were more integrated into the global environmental processes and attended events like international climate negotiations or global youth forums, while students in Vladivostok took part in more targeted initiatives, such as conferences on eco-tourism, biodiversity conservation, and scientific workshops. The opportunities to travel encouraged the participants to get the more globalised view of the world and appreciate Russia more.

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<sup>25</sup> Komsomol - (formerly) is the youth association of the Soviet Union for 14 - to 26-year-olds (Collins English dictionary).

A female co-founder of VLGreen had a chance to go on a study-tour of National Parks in the United States and attended several conferences in Asia. Speaking about her experience she said: *“I learned a lot, it was very interesting, but I was happy to come back — no other place has better nature and more opportunities than the Far East. I saw that people there do not live better in the US, they are not happier. I was disappointed by the States and I think that people in Korea or Japan have much better quality of life, so I don't know why people even want to go to the States.”* (Interview, Vladivostok, 2015).

Many of my contacts admitted that before joining the organisations they wanted to leave Russia, but their work made them appreciate Russia more and understand that no one “was waiting” for them elsewhere.

*“ I grew up dreaming about Barbie dolls and I had Britney Spears posters on my wall. I was dreaming of living in USA. After I got involved with civil society, started learning, travelling, going to trainings and capacity-building projects to different regions of Russia and different countries, I saw that people have problems everywhere. I have spent several months in the US and they have so many problems. They teach us how to build our NGOs, whereas they have so many problems themselves! Now I think Russia is an amazing place, and I really see a lot of potential in Vladivostok, and I want to work and live here.”*

*Maria, 25 y.o. project leader on environmental education of VLGreen*

*“I always wanted to leave Russia, but after having studied and visited many countries, I understood that everywhere could be good, you just need an interesting job, and you can really earn money in Russia.”*, said a female activist of UniGreen (Interview, Moscow, 2014). Partly, this view has been formed through the intimate knowledge of how the governmental system work in Russia. Almost all young activists I talked to have the experience of engagement with the local governments and the structures of authorities, that led to the interactions with local officials, such as city Dumas and municipal offices for the environment and youth policy. *“Over the years with UniGreen I have been exposed to the local government and I have learned about the processes that happen below the surface. You learn how the deals are made and you know with who to talk to if you want to achieve something”*, said a male participant of UniGreen and a recycling project coordinator.

*“Because I volunteered for VLGreen, I learned the rules of the game here, and how the government and the University administration work. I understand this place, so it is nicer for me to live here. Everything I have seen and experienced like travelling and studying abroad, convinced me that Russia is a great place to live, especially the Far East.”*

Former participant of VLGreen (Interview, Vladivostok, 2014)

*Before joining UniGreen I haven't been thinking much about Russia or politics, but by being involved with the movement I started knowing our city administration. I could just come there and they would say “we know who you are and we will support your projects”. I used to think that everyone was corrupt in Russia, and that the Government workers were mean, but in fact they listen to you, and they are waiting for you and ready to work with you.*

Climate Change project leader of UniGreen (Interview, Moscow, 2015)

*“If I need to leave Russia and live abroad, I will be a nobody. Here, in Moscow, my student activities are already paying off. I know all the people here, and I know who can help me, and who to ask for advice.”*, said a male participant of UniGreen (Interview, Moscow, 2015). These responses suggest that involvement with environmental movements did not only made students to appreciate Russia and learn about the inner workings of the government systems but also provided the participants with important connections.

The culture of patronage and *blat*<sup>26</sup>, which can be described as building connections to enhance one's chances to thrive in the system and is reflective of how Soviet society functioned, is very prominent among the movements and can be observed casually through interactions between the participants even after the graduation. During the focus groups, that were attended not only by current and former members the movements, I witnessed multiple conversations like the examples below:

*X: You know, I work in the city administration now? I have access to everyone.*

*Y: Of course, I noted.*

*X: Let's do something! We have all the conditions to do any environmental projects we want now.*

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<sup>26</sup> Blat is a barter-based on personal relationships, to acquire goods and services in short supply (Lebeneva 1998: 34 in Lindquist, 2006).

*Y: I know! But still all is so bureaucratic...*

*X: Don't worry - I can push all the structures.*

*Y: Oh cool! Let's meet separately and talk about it later. If I ever need help, I know who to call now (laughing).*

(Focus group, Vladivostok, 2015)

*X: Where I am now, it is all thanks to the head of UniGreen. He gave me the references to all my jobs. And he never denied any help.*

*Y: Oh yes, he also helped me! I am actually employed thanks to being a part of UniGreen, thanks to the connections and the references we got there.*

(Focus group, Moscow, 2015)

It has to be noted, however, that contrary to Chirikov's research, the students who join environmental movements, were not driven there to partake in the culture of *blat*, but once they started contributing to the movement, they started to recreate the Soviet culture of connections and favours. The overall attitude to *blat* amongst my contacts was negative, as it implied associations with corruption, and my contacts explicitly stated that they didn't join the organisations to look for connections. However, from participant observations it has become apparent, that movement participants used their connections for their personal goals, as well as for their projects.

This section has introduced two environmental movements and demonstrated that they exhibit features of path dependence from foreign-funded ENGOs, such as connectedness with the west and the presence of opportunities for going abroad. Due to the lack of funding, they also demonstrate what they perceive to be the Soviet era features, such as membership, and the culture of favours. I argue that following path-dependency, the familiar forms of Soviet-time student-led structures took reign after the foreign organisations left. The next section will use the examples of anti-waste campaigns led by these movements to look into this issue in more detail.

### **Making new from the old: recycling campaigns and framing.**

In modern Russia, waste disposal has become an increasingly important issue, as there is not enough capacity to recycle, a comprehensive waste management system is not in place, and the citizens have relatively low environmental awareness; hence do not take part even in limited recycling options available (Ishkov, 2010). Bearing in mind that "making new out of old by mobilising the genius of workers became the encapsulation of what socialism was about" (Gille 2007;64), it is im-

portant to examine what discourses young activist in modern Russia use to run their campaigns and how they mobilise the public in order to understand which development path Russian environmental movement is likely to follow.

Russian ENGOs have been paying attention to waste issues for many years (Crotty and Hall, 2013) and in many cases it is impossible to avoid the associations with the Soviet Union. Taking into account communism legacy and population's sentiments for the «good old times» (Ishkov, 2001) it could be argued that most families in the post-Soviet space remember the wide networks of glass collection points and how the schools and other institutions used to collect paper waste- *makulatura*. In order to motivate people to recycle again, one would encounter strong associations with Communism and the economy of shortage. Therefore the framing strategies to promote the recycling cause are of crucial importance.

In the context of a newly forming post-foreign-funding environmental movement, waste could be a visible and symbolic object that can be removed, so-called a «low-hanging fruit» of physical place transformation and therefore establish a new identity of people caring for the place and the environment. It is interesting to note, that without having any direct communication between each other, both UniGreen and VGreen have chosen paper recycling as their flagship projects and organised paper collection in a similar way and used the same frames to engage University administration and students to take part in their initiatives.

Both organisations developed common discourses in order to mobilise the public - a shared interpretation of problems and solutions through this online and off-line networks to re-define collective identities in accordance with the movement goals and serve as the settings for framing processes (Benford & Snow, 2000). They used different frames in their promotional materials, public speeches, official documents and online.

When appealing to local officials, or announcing the campaigns via the city administration, the language they used was official and resembled Soviet-time bureaucratic language. “Masterclasses are designed to teach participants practical skills. The events in this category will address the questions such as “how can I help” and “how can I do something useful”. The topic of the master-class will be organising a separate waste collection”. (UniGreen official project description).

They used English words and slogans such as “reduce-reuse-recycle”, or announced events such as craft and scrapbooking making, which were framed as trendy meetings for young people,

where they would give new life and make new things from waste. For one event, VLGreen invited a foreign student from Japan to host a session on how to recycle at home and how to fold milk cartons, so that they wouldn't take much space in the bin. UniGreen has invited a speaker from Denmark to speak about his experience of promoting a waste-free lifestyle. The organisers admitted that most of the time the experience of foreign speakers was not applicable to Russian reality, however, the framing of meeting as "international" would consistently attract a higher number of participants. I also noticed, that while initially many students were attracted to attend because of a foreign speaker, they then used the event to redefine their own identity, and position themselves opposite to the foreigner.

*"I think it is very easy for us to live in an environmentally-friendly way. Europeans have to re-discover it: they need to learn how to repair their clothes, how to eat organic, how to reuse things— we already know it. We are just living like that because there is no other way. We take care of the environment because it's economical. My grandma is washing plastic bags because it's cheaper, not because she is living some green lifestyle or something."*

A participant of anti-waste campaign from VLGreen (Participant observation, Vladivostok, 2014)

When talking about centralised system of waste separation, project leaders in both cities mentioned that they would like a more authoritarian approach to student governance in to make the recycling and collection process easier and centralised. In Moscow the project leader said: *"I wish it was the Soviet Union still - we wouldn't have such problems. We would only need to convince the head of the university, or even the city and he would just order everyone to be more sustainable — there would be no debate about anything"* (Interview, Moscow, 2015).

The students were aware of the practice of *makulatura* recycling in the Soviet Union, but they have chosen to use international frames to attract people to the cause. However, when they were holding big public events or would talk to the journalists, both organisations in Moscow and Vladivostok have chosen to frame their project within the official policy of green economy. United Nations Environmental Programme (UNEP) defines "green economy" as the economic system that results in improved human well-being and social equity, while significantly reducing environmental risks and ecological scarcities. The discourses on green economy among other issues concern waste management and recycling and promise that solving this problem will result in economic benefits and new jobs (Geng et al., 2008).

At the end of August 2014, the Summer School on Green Economy took place in Moscow, organised by the UniGreen. The declared goal of the summer school was to exchange the best practices in student environmental activism from Russian and European universities, however, in practice it appeared that the goal was to strengthen the network of paper recycling focal points throughout Moscow. The year before, this summer school sparked paper recycling campaigns in 5 Moscow Universities, and, in 2014, the organisers chose the frame of the green economy to promote their cause.

*“Green economy is a state policy, so we have the full support when we speak about it. Besides, it is great to see the State getting behind doing all these useful things such as recycling, using public transport and bicycles. But you can’t make sudden changes - it is a key to get the support of a high-ranked official, and then to start with small but obvious things, like recycling. You know, that Soviet generation is used to such projects”.*

The Summer School organiser, Interview, Moscow, 2015

In Vladivostok, the paper recycling campaign has been launched in two universities in 2009, as the first initiative of VLGreen, and was still operational in 2014. The organisers of the annual green conference in 2014, where all the project leaders met to discuss the strategy for the next year, were quite cynical about the official governmental policies, but yet chosen to frame their campaign within the official discourse.

*“The government used to be into energy efficiency before, and now they are into green economy — but it is the same to me. It is a State policy and it is better for us to use this framework safely. It doesn’t matter what do you say about it; it matters what you do, it is all serving a good cause. It is easy to fit recycling in this policy of course, and it is effective, easy to show and it doesn’t bother anyone. Universities are also happy to report on this, so everybody wins.”*

Activist of VLGreen, Interview, Vladivostok, 2014

A conference coordinator noted that even though they disagreed with the framing, they

chose to pragmatically use the official policy when talking to the authorities.

*“I don’t know why we would use some policy to justify what we are doing? It is so simple! We have all been doing recycling. This is what our parents used to do. I think that the Soviet Union got it right in some areas — there was no overconsumption, so it was more environmentally friendly”*, mentioned a participant of VLGreen.

It is evident that waste management and recycling campaigns had a clear associations with the Soviet Union even for the participants who have never lived in the USSR, and at the same time, they allowed to bring in new discourses of exciting foreign practices such as scrapbooking and up-cycling. However, when talking to the older generation, they would use the Soviet rhetoric of *makulatura* collection and top-down bureaucracy.

Both UniGreen and VLGreen in Moscow and Vladivostok used the discourses of green economy to fit in with the official policy, in order to depoliticise their activism, which suggest that the post-foreign-funding civil society of Russia is following path dependence of the Soviet Union and becoming more embedded within the official structures by using non-controversial framing strategies. Utilising state-sponsored discourses allowed students to depoliticise their activities and gain city-wide and even federal support for their environmental projects that were easy to explain and were understood by the Russian officials.

## **Conclusion**

After the governmental assault of foreign-funded ENGO, the paper looked at the “post-foreign-funding” civil society. The case studies of two environmental movements in Moscow and Vladivostok have demonstrated the interconnectedness between the legacy of the foreign funding and the path that the Soviet Union provided for the civil society in modern Russia. On the one hand, both movements used foreign discourse, imported by western-sponsored ENGOs, which also served as a motivator for young people to join. On the other hand, project coordinators took precautionary approach of depoliticising environmental politics and used the frames that were within the governmental policy, such as the green economy.

I argued that the young activists followed path dependence and recreated familiar Soviet structures to organise their movement. They actively depoliticise their activities and seek support from the government, therefore becoming more embedded with the State, than the previous generation of environmental activist. They pay greater attention to membership and rely almost entirely on

their members for running their programmes. Within the movements, there is an evident culture of *blat*, which stretched beyond University graduation. Finally, the movement participants came across as being patriotic, and either apolitical or supporting the current regime.

This paper argued that the first generation of ENGOs have become removed from the general public and grew inwards, however the discourses of nature protection and wildlife conservation they used have reflected on how young Russian environmentalists frame their messages. At the same time post-foreign-funding environmental movements follow path dependence of the Soviet structures such as the student union. The paper has demonstrated that because western donors were trying to distance themselves from the Soviet heritage of collective voluntarism the ENGOs they created lacked membership support and have become vulnerable to political change. The youth-led groups in the modern Russia are more successful of mixing Soviet messages with the global and international discourses, which makes the environmental cause more appealing to larger audiences, paving the way to the form of mainstream environmentalism.

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## Chapter 6

### 6.1 Conclusion

This Dissertation focused on Russian and Chinese urban environmental activists and their strategies of de-politicising environmental projects through “embedded activism” framework. It has been argued that this strategy will eventually lead to democratisation and western donors have invested heavily in developing an independent civil society through increasing the number of ENGOs over the past 20 years. However, with the recent adoption of the new NGO laws in both countries and the increased control of foreign-funded organisations, the space for civil society had to be redrawn, and this research explored this new landscape in detail.

The papers in this Dissertation analysed the changing landscape of civil society in Russia and China, that has been impacted by the recent anti-NGO legislation and anti-foreigner rhetoric in both countries. The analyses revealed how ENGOs and environmental movements cope with these legal and political constraints and what strategies they use to continue their operations. The research also explored the new ways of environmentalism, introduced the concept of “post-foreign-funding” civil society and “lifestyle activism” used by the youth grassroots movements. The dissertation argued for an alternative way of understanding civil society and activism in Russia and China, with the possibility to extrapolate this view to other countries with authoritarian regimes. This chapter presents the central themes of the dissertation as discussed through the four papers and argues how they relate back to the overarching debates in the literature discussed.

First, this Dissertation explored the newly forming “post-foreign-funding” civil society in Russia and China. It opened with an exploration of “embedded activism” concept and analysed how it related to ENGOs work in modern Russia and China. Using the interviews and the vase study, the research showed what strategies small and medium sized ENGOs used in order to stay legitimate and adapt to political changes and examined the impacts of the recent laws that infringed on environmental activists’ contacts with the outside world. While some researchers suggested that this way of “embedded activism” would make ENGOs more resilient, my field study showed that, on the contrary, they appeared to be more vulnerable to external changes. The research explored the parallels in Russian and Chinese environmental activism and showed how ENGOs have been persistently de-politicising environmental projects in two countries. The “embedded activism” strategy has been moderately successful for almost twenty years in opening windows of opportunities for incremental policy changes in both countries, while the “embedded activism 2.0” strategy led to

further scaling down of ENGO work. It has been argued that this strategy would eventually lead to democratisation and stronger and more independent civil society, but this Dissertation disagrees with such premise. Small and medium sized ENGOs appeared to be more vulnerable to external changes, as they failed to make connections to the wider audiences and the next generation of activists. Using empirical data, I argued that the enactment of anti-NGO laws in Russia and China had discouraged young people from connecting their careers with the non-profit sector, which raises questions about its sustainability.

Secondly, this research studied the new middle class of urban millennials who are more global and better travelled than previous generations in Russia and China. It has uncovered how the demographic and socio-economic trends influenced the change in civil society, and introduced the new form of environmental activism - “lifestyle activism”. The second paper delved deeper into the parallels between ENGOs in Russia and China, and found that the dependence on foreign grants, clashes between global environmental discourses and local pollution concerns, existence in a tiny niche of allowed political participation led ENGOs to isolation from the general public and hindered their chances of survival after the adoption of restrictive laws.

This research introduced the second generation of environmentalists in Russia and China - university students and recent graduates who are involved in new forms of environmental movements - Hubs and clubs. Using comparative case studies, this Dissertation presented how the interaction between donors and grantees have changed in both countries and how young people are driving this dynamic to change. I argued that the appearance of Hubs, informal places that represent a new form of networking and environmentalism suited to the current political climate, enabled particular types of interactions, networks, and engagements which are suited to millennials. This marks the transformation of environmental activism, by providing an alternative to ENGOs and university-based societies, and reflects the change of political climate towards civil society in China.

I argued that the “international” nature of environmentalism makes it more elitist and hence attractive for young people to join the movement. Using empirical data I showed that without direct influence of foreign funding, the leaders of environmental movements in Russia and China choose to invite experts from overseas to teach them the best practices of environmentalism, which they see not as a political struggle, but rather a lifestyle choice. By combining personalised “resign activism” strategies with prefigurative politics the activists impact their immediate surroundings, through “lifestyle activism”.

Thirdly, this Dissertation looked in depth into Chinese ENGO landscape and analysed the new characteristics of the “post-foreign-funding” civil society. Using examples of Hubs in Kunming and Beijing, the paper attempted to show how young people engage with them, what are their motivations and how they contribute to the global environmental movement. This Dissertation argued that through the Hubs, Chinese millennials feel part of the “global citizenry” and use “greenspeak” to appeal to their members, invite foreign speakers and ask Western experts to conduct capacity-building exercises. The chapter shows that although these practices have been introduced by the previous generation of Western funders, they are now driven by the recipients who follow path dependency, even if they do not receive the funding from abroad. The forms of “lifestyle activism” that this research presented were consistent with apolitical “embedded activism” and non-confrontation “re-signed activism” suggested by other researchers. While the impacts of all the Hubs activities on the future of Chinese civil society are not clear, they paint a picture of urban unofficial youth environmental activism, which could become platforms for a new generation of bridge builders and coalition brokers.

Finally, this Dissertation looked into Russian “post-foreign-funding” civil society by using the case studies of two environmental movements in Moscow and Vladivostok. The research demonstrated the interconnectedness between the legacy of the foreign funding and the path that the Soviet Union provided for the civil society in modern Russia. The fourth chapter has analysed the anti-waste campaigns run by student volunteers and found that while both movements used foreign discourses imported by western-sponsored ENGOs, the project coordinators took precautionary approach of depoliticising environmental politics and used the frames that were within the State policy, such as the green economy in order to receive administrative support for their campaigns. The paper showed that the leaders of the “post-foreign-funding” civil society in modern Russia actively depoliticise their activities and seek support from the government, therefore becoming more “embedded” with the State.

This Dissertation showed that Russian youth environmental groups pay greater attention to membership and rely almost entirely on their members for running their programmes, following path-dependency of the Soviet organisations such as *komsomol* or student unions. The paper has demonstrated that because western donors were trying to distance themselves from the Soviet heritage of collective voluntarism the ENGOs they created lacked membership support and have become vulnerable to political change. The youth-led groups in the modern Russia are more successful of mixing Soviet messages with the global and international discourses, which makes the envi-

ronmental cause more appealing to larger audiences, paving the way to the form of mainstream environmentalism.

Overall, this Dissertation has evaluated the impact of the newly adopted restrictive civil society laws on the Russian and Chinese non-profit landscape. The research argued that the laws are set to discourage young people from connecting their careers with NGOs, which raises questions about the sustainability of the sector and sets the barriers to entry for new NGOs even higher. This Dissertation concluded that the western donors' strategy of "more NGOs means more democracy" didn't succeed in Russia or China, as it has created an isolated class of small organisations that lacked membership and public support. In order to survive, these ENGOs had to depoliticise themselves through the "embedded activism" strategies, but as the empirical research showed, this made them vulnerable to recent legal and political changes. Arguing with the consensus on the fact that the space for civil society in Russia and China has been closed, my work suggested that instead it has shifted, If the perspective on civil society and activism could be moved from viewing it as an entity necessarily antagonistic to the State, we would see a different picture - the new conditions for "embedded activism 2.0" push the existing ENGOs to search for new strategies to minimise or prevent the impacts of the NGO laws, and the legacy of foreign connections motivate young people to engage in their own vision of environmentalism, opening the new era of "post-foreign-funding" civil society. It would be interesting to test the embedded activism concept and the impacts of NGO laws to assess how the space for civil society has shifted and how the sector is perceived by young people in other countries with similar arrangements and whether "lifestyle activism" strategies are shared by millennial generation globally.

## **6.2 Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research**

The limitations of this study concern both the methods and my own positionality. Case study and qualitative research techniques are aimed at describing the processes and motivations, but cannot generalise for the environmental movements or the countries they represent. My own biases as a leader of an ENGO could be reflected in my questions and the people I contacted. Although I had designed the study very meticulously and have got very useful feedbacks before I left, I had to redesign the study and change the research questions on the go. My access has been compromised by the sudden turn in political attitudes towards the NGOs and the enactment of the foreign funding

laws. The topics that at the time of the research designed have been completely “innocent,” have become very contested after I have arrived at the field.

The events in Ukraine and the umbrella revolution in Hong-Kong might have affected my contacts and made them distance themselves from politics even further. Finally, as seen from the table of informants, most interviewees are female, and less than a third of my contacts were male. While this is partly reflective of environmental movements demographic structure in Russia and China, I have also preferred scheduling interviews with women, after several men tried to make advancements on me after the interviews. Due to personal safety concerns, and following the advise of my supervisors, I have switched the focus of my study to younger people and preferred to interview young women.

This presents an opportunity for further research, on civil society in authoritarian and semi-authoritarian regimes. More specifically, it opens up several avenues for further exploration regarding the following pivotal areas.

Firstly, this study encourages researchers, through its ethnographic findings, to conduct in-depth investigations of environmental activists and perhaps to expand the demographic and to include not other members of society, and of different age groups, and to focus on the gender imbalance in more detail.

Secondly, this research establishes a basis for comparative evaluations of ENGOs in different countries, and provides the framework to contrast and compare the strategies that civil society activist use in the situation of similar political crackdowns. The follow-up study on expanding the comparative scope of the analysis and bringing in more countries and cases would be valuable in providing evidence to describe specific features of civil society in constrained political environments.

Thirdly, this study’s outcome makes possible research on the effectiveness of grant-makers and overseas donor programmes in other areas of civil society activism. Such further research would enable to compare environmental activism with other sectors such as human rights or political activism.

Finally, the findings of this thesis point the way to further research on the impact of legal changes on civil society, and the use of framing strategies to sustain operations. Future research would be needed to evaluate the effectiveness of these youth movements that this dissertation has argued will contribute to the “post-foreign-funding” civil society in Russia and China.

## Appendix A

### Respondents' details

The list informants.

The interviews have been conducted with the following groups of people:

Respondents	Male	Female	Total
ENGO leaders and participants in Moscow	3	7	10
ENGO leaders and participants in Vladivostok	4	6	10
ENGO leaders and participants in Beijing	4	5	9
ENGO leaders and participants in Kunming	3	7	10
Young activists in Moscow	12	20	32
Young activists in Vladivostok	6	25	31
Young activists in Beijing	10	19	29
Young activists in Kunming	5	23	28
Foreign donors and experts	12	5	17

Total number of respondents 176