Overview of the Nonprofit Sector in Eastern Europe, Russia, and Central Asia

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After the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, the fifteen newly independent states have followed a range of sociopolitical trajectories—landing a smaller minority on the path toward democracy in the European Union (EU), while leaving the majority in a variation of hybrid regimes. Understandably, civil society/nonprofit sector (NPS) developments in these independent countries have likewise taken different turns along those trajectories, showcasing varied levels and kinds of nonprofit institutionalization, civic engagement, and citizens’ collective influence on their states. Importantly, however, while hundreds of thousands of voluntary organizations of different kinds have emerged in the post-Soviet region since 1991, contrary to popular expectations and despite significant Western aid efforts, this development has not resulted in the achievement of healthy and robust civil society/NPS, nor any sweeping democratization in the region.

What impact did the last quarter century have on civil society in these diverse countries with their common totalitarian past? And why did the seeming growth in the quantity of formal nonprofit organizations (NPOs) not bring about the much anticipated qualitative democratic and civil society/NPS outcomes? We endeavored to answer these questions by turning to scholars native to this region, which we term here as Eastern Europe, Russia, and Central Asia (EERCA) to emphasize our volume’s contemporary focus and the great contextual diversity present in this region.

Volume’s Content, Approaches, and Terminology

This volume presents an edited selection of exemplary NPS research articles originally published in native languages of EERCA that have not previously appeared in English language publications. Particularly, the volume focuses on the countries that used to be member republics of the Soviet Union and that are now at different stages of political development and democratization processes. The volume contains journal articles, book chapters, and official
reports on NPS topics in eleven (of fifteen) former Soviet Republics, that is, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Estonia, Georgia, Kyrgyzstan, Latvia, Lithuania, Moldova, Russia, and Ukraine. The authors of these chapters not only possess significant scholarly expertise in NPS issues in the EERCA region, but also have a nuanced understanding of the local contexts, either being born in one of the EERCA countries and still residing there, or originating from the region but currently residing in other countries.

The volume features truly cross-disciplinary contributions from scholars with backgrounds in a wide variety of fields, including Economics, Sociology, Political Science, Public Administration, History, and Cultural Studies. Works included in this volume previously appeared in books or journals published by civil society/NPS resource centers and international organizations operating in the region, such as National Institute of Development (Moldova), Baltic Institute of Social Sciences (Latvia), European Humanities University’s Center for Advanced Studies and Education (Ukraine), as well as disciplinary journals from the authors’ home disciplines, including Economic Issues (Russia), Forum of Newest Eastern European History and Culture (Ukraine), Caucasus and Globalization: Geo-Economics (Azerbaijan), and Public and Municipal Administration Issues (Russia), among others.

In their studies, the authors employ a variety of methodological approaches, including quantitative research based on large-scale national representative surveys, qualitative studies based on smaller, convenience sample interviews and focus groups, case study analyses, and mixed-method approaches, as well as conceptual analyses. The research, methodology, and publishing approaches and standards in the EERCA region, however, often differ from those in the West. We also note divergences in theoretical approaches employed by EERCA scholars. For instance, several papers included here provide lengthy analyses of laws and regulations governing voluntary organizations in EERCA as being crucial factors in the development of the NPS, something that is rarely emphasized in the USA, with the exception of tax-exemption laws and their effect on donor behavior. Conversely, in EERCA region, where bureaucracy and corruption are associated with relatively high tax-noncompliance in society (Picur & Riahi-Belkaoui, 2006), the tax-exemption laws are far less relevant. The creation and imposition of restrictive and burdensome regulations on NPOs along with their selective application in the courts of law in the EERCA region have been linked with government’s attempts to suppress nonprofit activity and free associations.

Finally, the terminology used to describe the NPS/civil society and its institutions/organizations featured in this volume also often differs from terms used in the West. For example, the distinctions among NPOs, nonprofit agencies,