Lessons Learned and Larger Intellectual Contexts

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This volume has taken us on an exploration of the still emerging nonprofit sector in Eastern Europe, Russia, and Central Asia (EERCA), featuring countries that share a common Soviet past, and yet exhibit quite distinct patterns of civil society/NPS development. The original research on various aspects of civil society and nonprofit organizations (CSOs and NPOS) produced by regional scholars and included in this volume sheds light on the growth and expansion of the sector after the collapse of the Soviet Union. These works present valuable knowledge that has not been properly reflected in the mainstream Western scholarship, as well as draw our attention to several new puzzles and potential research questions that will be discussed in this concluding chapter. The overarching finding that cuts across this volume’s contributions and serves as an organizing theme for our concluding chapter is as follows: despite the proliferation of nonprofit organizational forms and their evident growth in numbers, the development of the NPS has not yet led to the genuine and sustainable democratization of the EERCA region, contrary to the expectations of many Western scholars.

The fourteen central chapters (Chapters 2–15) of this volume present original research by scholars from the EERCA region, highlighting a number of topics pertinent to the development of the region’s CSOs and NPOS. We have organized these diverse contributions into three thematic parts: the first part highlights the studies on NPOS, both nonprofit agencies and voluntary associations; the second part focuses on government–nonprofit relations and the legal and institutional frameworks that provide the basis for the sector’s existence; and the third part focuses on informal nonprofit sector phenomena and such related processes as civic engagement and informal volunteering. This structure allows the following three major themes that emerge from these substantively and methodologically diverse scholarly works to be highlighted:

1) The overall significance and impact of the nonprofit sector in a society and the boundaries between the nonprofit and other sectors.
2) Common barriers to the efficacy of the nonprofit sector and nonprofit organizational effectiveness that exist.
3) The scope and meaning of informal volunteering and culturally distinct manifestations of civic engagement.
This concluding chapter provides a summative overview of these three themes and also considers how the volume's contents may be viewed in terms of three larger intellectual contexts noted briefly in Chapter 1, such as: (1) the context of voluntaristics research; (2) the context of area studies; and (3) the context of democratization. We also suggest future research directions that are likely to be of interest to the nonprofit sector/civil society scholars in the region, as well as global voluntaristics scholars in other fields (Smith, 2013, 2016).

The Nonprofit Sector’s Role and Its Boundaries in EERCA

As has been noted by various observers, in the USA NPOs, particularly voluntary associations, have been important social institutions, and vibrant associational activity has been at the root of the modern-day nonprofit sector since the beginning of the American Republic (Ellis & Noyes, 1990; Hall, 2006; Skocpol, Ganz, & Munson, 2000). The NPS and NPOs played a variety of social, political, and economic roles long before their activity was formally institutionalized and widely recognized. Moreover, associationalism (the perspective of valuing associations and their impacts on society) has served as one of the fundamental values of American society, thus legitimizing vital social functions performed by the nonprofit sector/civil society and formal associations as foundations of the political and economic order alongside the state itself (Bluhm & Heineman, 2007; Donaldson & Carlson-Thies, 2003; Eberly & Streeter, 2002).

In the EERCA region, however, NPS activity has been severely constrained for the most part of the last century, up until the late 1980s or early 1990s. Moreover, during the Soviet era, some forms of nonprofit organizational activity, for example, trade unions and communist organizations, were imposed by the Soviet state itself. All associational activity was heavily regulated to make sure it did not contradict the state’s ideology (cf. Swanson, 1974). As a result, the modern-day NPS in the region lacks institutionalization and is less formalized, as compared to the Western context. Moreover, formal NPOs often coexist with informal associations, groups, and activities.

As noted by Toepler and Salamon (2003) for Central and Eastern Europe, and by many contributors to this volume (see Chapters 2, 3, 4, 10, 11, and 12), NPOs in the EERCA region have faced numerous challenges due to the lack of recent (i.e., 20th-century) historically rooted associational practices, which can be partially explained by the continued influence of the Soviet legacy.

First, the scope and substance of NPOs are highly dependent upon the political regime that exists in a given country. Such regime variations explain in