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# Environmental governance in the Russian federation: firms and regulator perception of environmental NGOs

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**ABSTRACT**

Against the backdrop of increasing public awareness of global environmental challenges, this paper examines the potential for collaborative environmental governance in the Russian Federation. To do so, we examine regulators' and firms' perceptions of, and collaborations with, environmental non-governmental organizations (eNGOs) in three Russian regions. Our findings highlight that Russian firms rarely collaborateor include eNGOs in environmentally-focused activities because they perceive them to be ineffective, invisible, or irrelevant. Russian regulators do engage with eNGOs, but not as equal partners in the form of collaborative governance arrangements; regulators reduce eNGOs to the positions of subordinates and/or assistants.

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Russia; collaborative governance; environmental NGO; regulator

## Introduction

The 1992 United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) kick-started multilateral action on environmental protection, pollution abatement, and control. To meet the challenges outlined by the UNFCCC requires the collaborative engagement of a range of actors, including but not limited to: regulators, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and industrial enterprises/firms, ranging from multinational, national, and regional levels of action (Bodin 2017). Such multi-stakeholder approaches are characterised as collaborative governance or

> processes and structures of public policy decision-making and management that engage people constructively across the boundaries of public agencies, levels of government, and/or the public, private and civic spheres in order to carry out a public purpose that could not otherwise be accomplished. (Emerson, Nabatchi, and Balogh 2012, 2)

Key to collaborative governance is the mutual recognition of relevant actors (O'Leary and Vij 2012). It has become particularly popular in areas where government regulation and its enforcement struggle to address underlying issues, including environmental protection (Ansell and Gash 2008; Bingham 2011; Siddiki, Kim, and Leach 2017).

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Within contexts such as the US or Western Europe, collaborative governance arrangements work alongside the state's increasing focus on rule-making, its decreaing governance capacity, decreasing resources, and its increasing reliance on self-regulation/private governance initiatives such as corporate social responsibility (CSR). Although an in-depth discussion is beyond the remit of this paper, CSR assumes that firms will *voluntarily* engage in activity to address perceived responsibilities outside the firm's legal and economic obligations, otherwise known as going beyond compliance (Davis 1973). CSR also intersects with stakeholder theory (Carroll 1999), wherein CSR is not only about going beyond compliance, but also about embracing collaboration within and between the firm and said stakeholders – be that employees on boards or engaging with pressure or community groups – to find appropriate solutions and/or projects (see for example, Fontana 2018). Thus, conceptually at least, CSR has moved away from firms "imposing" solutions or managing stakeholders (Matten and Crane 2005) towards a form of collaborative governance; such trends are often observed in regulatory states (Green and Auld 2017; Hysing 2009; Phillips 2006) wherein a decreasing governance capacity and associated resources, leads to an increased reliance on self-regulation/private governance (Braithwaite 2011; Levi-Faur 2009).

Increased self-regulation and collaborative governance arrangements have legitimised the engagement of NGOs to work with, as well as to challenge the activities of both the state and *for*-profit organisations in this process (Gunningham 2009; Hickmann et al. 2021). It has also opened up a space for non-state actors (i.e. either NGOs or firms) to act as rule-makers in democratic contexts (Hysing 2009; Jackson and Rathert 2017; Mendel 2010; Pattberg 2005). However, this de-emphasis/detachment of the state vis-à-vis governance or even rule-making in matters of environmental governance (Bo, Böhm, and Reynolds 2019) is unlikely to be acceptable within an authoritarian or semi-authoritarian context such as China or the Russian Federation. In these two contexts, environmental protection and politics are contested (Wu and Martus 2021), and the state seeks to maintain influence across environmental governance processes (Guttman et al. 2018) because many environmentally harmful activities play an important role in their economic development (Bobylev 2005; Wang, Wijen, and Heugens 2018).

Thus, it is not surprising that research on environmental governance in (semi) authoritarian contexts does not produce a similar level of detachment by the state in such matters. Summarising studies across the Global South, Dubash and Morgan (2013) highlight that states have attempted to increase the perception of the dominance of rule-based governance; however, cultural-institutional legacies and regime maintenance requirements mean that the state remains important in all scenarios, or what Dubash and Morgan (2013) term an embedded regulatory state. Yet, these developments have also "welcomed expertise-based inputs" (Hochstetler 2013, 269) from NGOs, even in contexts that are hostile to civil society. This is also reflected in the experience of NGOs contributing to environmental governance in China, often by raising environmental issues at a local level (Bo, Böhm, and Reynolds 2019). Others highlight that NGOs can influence and improve environmental governance if they remain within pre-determined institutional parameters (Dai and Spires 2018) or observe the formal or informal "rules of engagement" and activities which are strengthening the state's governance through their contributions (Dai and Spires 2018; Zeng, Dai, and Javed 2019). In order to do this however, the state needs to acknowledge and engage with NGOs (Guttman et al. 2018), attributing them with a degree of competence and expertise. This is the important context in emerging

governance arrangements (Dubash and Morgan 2013), necessitating further research that assesses the dynamic of multiple stakeholders within (semi) authoritarian political landscapes. Consequently, in this paper, we contribute to this exploration by examining the following question: to what extent do regulators (i.e. the state), as well as companies, involve or collaborate with eNGOs in environmental governance in (semi) authoritarian contexts? To study this question, we focus on collaborative environmental governance in the Russian Federation.

The Russian Federation is a suitable political environment to explore such a question because it is a semi-democratic regime with an economic model based on the exploitation of its abundant natural resources (Tynkkynen and Tynkkynen 2018). Consequently, it has problems linked to the environmental legacy of Soviet industrial and agricultural policies (Pryde 1991); it has the need to preserve Russia's wilderness as part of the global response to climate change (Newell and Henry 2016); alongside an inefficient state regulatory environmental governance structure (Crotty 2003a; Crotty and Rodgers 2012b; Newell and Henry 2016; Mol 2009a; Oldfield, Kouzmina, and Shaw 2003;). In addition, although the environmental movement previously enjoyed an almost "protected" status in the Russian Federation stemming largely from its legacy as the only dissident group to be tolerated during the Soviet period (Weiner, 2022), eNGO legitimacy and expertise on environmental issues is now also increasingly questioned, making it more challenging for groups to affect environmental policy creation and its subsequent enforcement (Newell and Henry 2016; Wu and Martus 2021).

As a result, anti-modern[1] state-firm relationships are utilised to find "solutions" to environmental problems (Henry and Tysiachniouk 2018; Levy and Newell 2005; Vatn 2018), often benefitting individuals or firms rather than addressing environmental issues and limiting the development of multi-stakeholder governance approaches. Thus, in this paper, we explore the extent to which eNGOs are perceived as appropriate collaborative partners by both firms and regulators in this context. To address this question, we draw on data collected in three Russian regions which have active environmental movements and significant environmental problems resulting from industrialisation (Samara Oblast and Volgograd Oblast) and the exploitation of agricultural land (Stavropol Krai).

The paper is structured as follows: we first provide an overview of environmental protection in the Russian Federation. Second, we outline the methodology of our study and provide a more detailed insight into our findings. Third, we conclude the paper by discussing what these insights mean for environmental governance and the prospect of collaborative governance in the Russian Federation. In so doing, within firms we find very few instances of CSR activities aimed at environmental issues at all, and fewer still of stakeholder engagement to find collaborative solutions between eNGOs and firms. We find significantly more collaboration between eNGOs and regulators, but this is not a partnership of equals, with given that the regulator routinely views the eNGO merely as their "assistant".

## Environmental protection and eNGOs in the Russian Federation

Occupying a "Little Corner of Freedom" (Weiner 2002), independent environmental campaigning in the Russian Federation can be traced back to the 1930s (Weiner 2002). It was the only dissident movement to be openly tolerated by the Soviet regime (Weiner 2002). However, rather than "activists", this movement was borne from the scientific community

and its warnings about the impact on Lake Baikal from rapid industrialisation. Despite its lack of "activism", its campaigning campaign legacy meant it was well placed to take advantage of Glasnost and the Chernobyl accident, and played a prominent role in the protests that helped bring the Soviet regime to an end (Feldman and Blokov 2012). Despite the movement's fragementation following the collapse of the Soviet Union, this legacy gave it a vital role in Russia's post-Soviet civil society development. The myriad small and locally focussed groups remained a safe haven for activism and independent campaigning for more than 20 years.

Hybrid regimes[2] like Russia rely on enabling some citizen participation at the local level. If people can successfully raise grievances locally, it helps to limit larger-scale social unrest (Henry 2012; Howell 2016). Thus, for Russian eNPOs, becoming the instrument through which local grievances were expressed ensuring the organisation's legitimacy with elites, and wider public acceptance (Henry 2010). However, this community governance focus (Bowles and Gintis 2002; Howell 2016) meant that organisations at the national level have become somewhat redundant, particularly if they were perceived as political or engage in "anti-Russian" activity. Moreover, Vladimir Putin has expressed open hostility towards environmental groups, stating that they should be working for the good of the nation, rather than politics (Martus 2021). The state has also since 2017 begun targetting high-profile and nationally recognised environmental activists and groups, including Baikal Wave, Dront and EcoDefence, using the state security apparatus to unsettle and provoke them (HRW 2017). This has left the smaller, more anonymous groups with local and/or regional focuses (that have limited ability to attract overseas funding, and are thus unlikely to be on the foreign agent list)[3] more freedom to operate (Newell and Henry 2016; Spencer and Skalaban 2018). With a local remit and profile, these groups are also more closely aligned with the community governance focus of the Putin regime and are therefore more acceptable partners in collaborative environmental governance.

Russia's policy of focusing on heavy and extractive industries to drive its economy (Bobylev 2005) has created myriad environmental problems. The complex nature of these problems, for example, air or river pollution (BBC News 2020; The Associated Press 2018), would benefit from a multi-stakeholder approach and the inclusion of Russian eNGOs in environmental governance and protection. However, on assuming the presidency for the first time in 2000, Putin decided to federalise/centralise and deinstitutionalise environmental control (Mol 2009a). This was done to further economic recovery via exploiting Russia's vast natural resource wealth. Putin merged the Federal State Committee for the Protection of the Natural Environmental *Goskomekologiya* into Russia's Federal Ministry for (the exploitation of) Natural Resources *Minresursov* (Oldfield 2001). In so doing, he created an inherent contradiction within the governance frameworks. A second wave of centralisation in 2006[4] further strengthened the powers of federal regulators and left regional (Oblast/Krai) and city inspectorates to deal only with non-industrial waste and pollution[5] (Crotty and Rodgers 2012a). With federal regulators often far removed from provincial Russia, these changes weakened the process of inspection and enforcement of environmental standards (Cherp and Golubeva 2004; Crotty 2003a). As a result, inspections decreased, yet powers to collect fines for non-compliance increased (Henry and Douhovnikoff 2008; Mol 2009b).

This regulatory focus on revenue-raising over control and environmental improvement led business leaders to view regulatory structures as illegitimate (Crotty and Rodgers

2012a). Despite this, Russian firms did enthusiastically engage with global initiatives such as the UN Global Compact (Henry and Sundstrom 2021a) or more sector-specific self-regulation initiatives such as ISO 14001 certification or FSC forest certification often to secure access to international markets (Henry and Sundstrom 2021b; Henry and Tysiachniouk 2018). In turn, this should have provided eNGOs the opportunities to engage in environmental governance and protection as these self-regulation initiatives often rely on multi-stakeholder engagement. However, eNGO participation in such self-regulation arrangements was limited. Henry and Sundstrom (2021a), for example, observed some initial eNGO engagement in the UN Global Compact, but continuing active participation remained symbolic and limited, often due to the perceived lack of value such engagement gave to their environmental causes, coupled with the cherry-picking of issues by firm participants. This highlights the challenges multi-stakeholder governance engagements (involving eNGOs, firms, or/and regulators) face within the Russian Federation. Thus our findings, of limited firm/eNGO collaboration, are in line with expectation. Before we present these findings however, we illustrate our methodological approach and study in more detail.

## Methodology

It is widely accepted that Russia's two major cities, Moscow and St Petersburg, are not representative of provincial Russia as a whole (Kuznetsov and Kuznetsova 2003). Specifically, with regards to eNGOs, Blinnikov and Lindsey (2010, 215) also note that "Moscow is home to the oldest and best-known naturalist programs", and therefore is not representative of the engagement of eNGOs across Russia as a whole. Moreover, as the scope and specificity of Russia's environmental problems are vast – from a legacy of pollution arising from so-called factory towns to the melting of permafrost in the arctic circle – the majority of eNGOs focus on local or regional issues rather than national. Further, insight from service-providing NGOs suggests that they have created opportunities to engage with governance arrangements at local and regional levels rather than at the Federal level (Ljubownikow and Crotty 2017). This must all be taken into account when researching the role that eNGOs play in environmental governance in cities and regions in provincial Russia. The data presented in this paper were collected as part of a wider research project looking at state-society-business relations in the Russian Federation, specifically those that pertained to CSR and environmental protection. As such, a range of stakeholders was interviewed, including local and region regulators, business leaders, and eNGO leaders and members. Focus groups with University students and community groups were also undertaken, alongside observations of eNGO activity and tours of industrial premises. Yet, for the purpose of the paper, we focus our analysis on the data collected from firms and regulators on how they *perceive* eNGOs, and the extent to which eNGOs were involved in their eCSR activity. In so doing we present data extrapolated from interviews with both firm leaders and regional and city regulators, emanating from three provincial cities: "Samara Oblast", "Volgograd Oblast" and Stavropol Krai.

These three regions were chosen for this study due to the nature of their regional economies but also because each had an identifiable community of eNGOs with whom firms and regulators could collaborate. The environmental movement in each was also dominated by eNGOs that were both local/regional in focus and arose as much from scientific

communities as they did activists – as was the Soviet tradition cities of Samara, Novokuybyshevsk, Syzran and Tolyatti, and Samara Oblast' has become a centre of moderate prosperity and at the same time, a hub of environmental activism with actors engaged in a range of activities; some activists are based around the Oblast's universities, focused on environmental assessment and education to campaigning to protect the region's national park, alongside grassroots and single-issue organisations (Crotty 2003b). Volgograd Oblast' has a similar economic profile to Samara. Here, economic activity is concentrated in the region's two largest cities, Volgograd and Volzhskiy, with leading industrial branches in chemical production, metallurgy and oil refining. Here the environmental movement was similar to that found in Samara, composed of groups dominated by academics engaged in environmental assessment and education, alongside grassroots organisations campaigning on single issues. Stavropol Krai has a more mixed agricultural and industrial economic base with industrial activity focused around the two cities of Budennovsk (oil refining) and Nevinnomyssk (chemical production). Here the environmental movement is smaller, and more focused on soil quality and protection of watercourse. Again academics dominated the larger groups, alongside smaller grassroots organisations. Industrial economic activity across three regions has high environmental impacts such as pollution. Moreover, at all three locations, eNGOs were found to have undertaken environmental assessment activity on behalf of the local authorities.

Before embarking on the fieldwork, web-based resources were used to research organisations engaged in environmental protection activities and to uncover other relevant regulators engaged in environmental protection. Lists of prospective contacts were developed in each region. With fieldwork taking place *in situ*, once the researcher arrived at each location, including project partners at Universities in Samara, Volgograd and, Stavropol who assisted in contracting and expanding contacts lists. This was also supplemented using the snowballing technique (asking interviewees for potential further contacts) to engage with further participants. As a result, a total of 64 qualitative interviews took place with firms (43) and regulators (21) across these three regions. Interviews with firms were all face-to-face and semi-structured with senior enterprise managers (see Appendix 2). Interviews with regulators were conducted with individuals responsible for enforcing environmental legislation as well as relevant elected officials. This included the deputies in state ministries and their counterparts in city and local administrations (see Appendix 1).

The interview process focused on the work and roles of participants in their respective organisations, including the everyday functioning of their respective organisations, issues surrounding environmental management and sustainability, and crucially for this paper, their knowledge of and interaction with eNGOs. The interview questions were framed around ideas of collaborative governance (Emerson, Nabatchi, and Balogh 2012), but respondents could define these from themselves, or not at all, depending on their point of view. Interviews lasted between 30 and 90 min and assumed a conversation-like approach, where the base set of questions was used to facilitate discussion alongside additional follow-up questions to probe responses and to add further insight. Where necessary, a translator was used to facilitate the interviews. Each interview was recorded with supplementary written notes taken alongside the recording, taken by the interviewer. Interviews usually involved one member of staff from each organisation, although, in a small number of interviews, two participants were involved in the conversation.

Following the fieldwork, all interviews were transcribed and anonymised.[6] Following the transcription of the interviews, the data were then coded into first-order codes (Gioia, Corley, and Hamilton 2013). As coding progressed and re-reading previously coded material took place, the codes were collated in emergent themes/categories (Charmaz and Mitchell 2007; Gioia, Corley, and Hamilton 2013). This process specifically highlighted two critical insights; (a) in the case of (many) firms a lack of knowledge about the existence of eNGOs and what they do and (b) in the case of regulators the value that could be derived from accessing specific expertise of eNGOs and their networks for regulators. Neither could be described as collaborative governance. The discussion that follows explores these issues using narratives from these interviews and "illuminating examples" (de Vaus 2001, 240) to illustrate key points. It is also useful to note that the Russian word *ekologiya*, directly translated as "ecology" is more commonly used to denote the natural environment as it relates to sustainable development than the literal translation *okruzhayushaya sreda*. As a result, the terms "ecology" and "environment" are used interchangeably by respondents throughout.

## Findings

To present our findings we divide them into the perceptions of, and interactions with, eNGOs from both industrial enterprises and regulators. In so doing, we find very little difference between the perceptions of firms and regulators. Instead, we find that the narratives from these actors do not focus on mutual recognition – a key component of effective collaborative environmental governance arrangements. Instead, narratives from firms indicate an ambivalence towards eNGOs, oftentimes discounting or discrediting their expertise. While keen to assert their social role through philanthropic endeavours, firms had very limited interaction with eNGOs; some firms even expressed disdain for working with eNGOs in general. Conversely, regulators indicated more interaction with eNGOs, but viewed them as "assistants" (Regulator L, Samara Oblast) in the development of policy rather than the co-creators. Neither firms nor regulators highlighted substantive engagement with eNGOs in a manner that reflects an environment conducive to collaborative environmental governance, or one that encourages positive environmental activity that goes beyond basic compliance. We first turn to explore firms' perceptions of eNGOs in more detail.

### *Invisible, irrelevant, illegitimate – firm perception of eNGOs*

Crotty (2016) indicates that Russian firms only engaged in social projects/activities beyond what is legally required of them if there was a convincing business case; if it arose from the cultural and/or historical legacy of paternalism in the firm's role in soviet society; or if the firm was coerced by the state to act in this way. None of these factors necessitate engagement with stakeholders such as NGOs. Hence, it is no surprise that in our study, firms expressed their strong preference to make their own decisions about the *social role of the factory* (Automotive Firm N, Volgograd Oblast) and did not consult other stakeholders when making decisions on corpororate social responsibility activities.

Acting upon this idea of the "social role of the factory" took on several forms, including *spontaneous acts of sacrifice* (Automotive Firm N, Volgograd Oblast), that is philanthropic

donations in response to a specific request. Some asserted that this stemmed from the Soviet legacy where the firm had a wider social role; describing their engagements as a *tradition* (Chemical Firm I, Volgograd Oblast); and thus maintaining a *social fund* (Chemical Firm L, Samara Oblast) or *philanthropy fund* (Household Goods Firm M, Stavropol Oblast) to support activities of this type. However, such assistance was almost exclusively directed at local cultural groups (Automotive Firm B, Samara Oblast), children's activities (Metallurgical Firm R, Volgograd Oblast) or healthcare-related entities, including orphanages (Petrochemical Firm Q, Volgograd Oblast). A small number of firms also alluded to working directly with local NGOs, though none of those were environmental groups. Instead, they named groups that can be traced back to the Soviet period, including, for example, the *Union of Veterans* (Automotive Firm N, Volgograd Oblast). Other research on Russian NGOs highlights how these types of welfare and social service organisations are generally seen as helpers of the state (Kulmala and Tarasenko 2016; Kulmala 2016).

Much of this response to societal engagement reflects the findings of previous studies where privatised firms referred to their Soviet heritage when conducting community engagement, yet do so *without* two-way engagement with the community that they assert to serve (Crotty 2016). Far fewer firms volunteered or positioned themselves as available to work with environmental projects or eNGOs. In fact, some went so far as to openly express disdain for eNGOs, as this excerpt below illustrates.

> I would say that we take them in a rather negative way … In my opinion, they speak too much. Possibly their hearts bleed for ecology, but they don't have any specific suggestions on how to solve problems.

And later

> There were a lot of roundtable discussions, conferences, and as a result, people became famous. So ecology is just a means for them to promote themselves. Then they start their own business, and they forget about ecology. (Chemical Factory 7, Samara Oblast)

Others stated that while they were open to dialogue with eNGOs, they perceived them as *not serious* (Chemical Firm H, Volgograd Oblast), or perhaps less critically, they did not engage with them previously because *[firms] have never been appealed to by them* [meaning that eNGOs have not approached them for resources] (Chemical Firm 5, Stavropol Krai). Other firms stated that they did not know of any eNGOs, emphasising that there *is a lack of NGOs in Russia* (Aluminium Firm 3, Samara Oblast) and so they *had no immediate relationships* (Automobile Firm 3, Samara Oblast) with NGOs – environmental or otherwise. Most firms, however, when challenged directly about the environment, ecology, or environmental governance, highlighted interactions with the regulator: *government, and municipal organs; the Ecological Committee for example* (Chemical Firm 5, Stavropol Krai). For firms, eNGOs were not part of such discussions – it was the state, coming in the form of the regulator, that set the rules of the game.

There were two notable exceptions to the above rule, namely Chemical Firm 3 in Volgograd Oblast and Automotive Firm 4 in Samara Oblast. These firms either named eNGOs directly or referenced joint activities they had undertaken with them. In the case of Chemical Firm 3, the eNGOs were Green Orbit and Eko-press. The former is a NGO sponsored by local firms and the local administration. Chemical Firm 3 *allowed [Green Orbit] to carry out some societal controls across our territory*. Eko-press is a small independent

environmental newspaper run as an NGO. It had been very successful in raising awareness about mercury in the local watercourse and soil which had been caused by heavy industry (polluting) in the region. Interview discourse at Chemical Firm 3 stated that *we are an open and transparent company and we are always happy to inform society of the ecological situation at our factory* and described their relations with Eko-press as *healthy*, non-confrontational, and friendly. Similarly, Automotive Firm 4 highlighted their interactions with the Samara Socio-Ecological Union, an eNGO that originated in the Soviet Union and which currently receives resources primarily from state authorities.

Reflecting a key tactic of NGOs by drawing on Soviet commemorative traditions (Danilova 2016), Automotive Firm 4 and the Socio-ecological Union co-created activities for *Environmental Protection Day* and as well as having collaborated on *a number of environmental educational projects* with local schools. This was the only example of eNGO-firm collaboration on environmentally-focused projects that featured in this study, whilst the interactions between Green Patrol, Eko-press and Chemical Firm 3 were the only examples of oversight activities – akin to collaborative governance – arranged by eNGOs in consultation with a firm. However, these cases are likely to be rare as the dominant narrative driven by the firms consulted in this study was that eNGOs were largely irrelevant, viewed with disdain, or were simply invisible to (almost all) firms. As a result, eNGOs were left out or unable to facilitate or contribute to independent voluntary environmental governance arrangements where they existed.

The picture our data provides from regulators, however, was somewhat different. ENGOs were not irrelevant or illegitimate but provided useful assistance in their regulatory activity (oversight), though not by shaping governance arrangements. We examine these findings below.

## *"Assist and assess" – regulators and eNGOs*

The regulators that participated in this study were regionally-based federal inspectors and regional and municipal regulators. The former had the authority to inspect firms and control industrial pollution, whilst the latter dealt with non-industrial environmental issues, including parks and public spaces (Crotty and Rodgers 2012b). Although all regulators highlighted that they were aware of this type of organisation, Regulator X (Stavropol Krai) was the exception in stating that *frankly speaking, I have never faced any; [I] have never dealt with ecological NGOs*. The remainder were at least aware of the existence of eNGOs in their city and/or region – yet some viewed them and *Russian civil society as very weak* (Regulator B, Samara Oblast) or that they had *never been close to social organizations* (Regulator J, Volgograd Oblast). These were in the minority; most respondents expressed positive interactions with eNGOs within specific conditions where there was *mutually advantageous co-operation* (Regulator T, Stavropol Krai). Such mutually advantageous co-operation appeared to take one of two forms.

The first were collaborative projects that improved the immediate physical environment, reflecting the changing remit of regional and municipal regulators to deal only with non-industrial waste and pollution (Crotty and Rodgers 2012a). Here regional and municipal environmental agencies engaged with eNGOs that could mobilise the population to *cleaning riverbanks* (Regulator R, Samara Oblast) and *planting in public parks* (Regulator D, Samara Oblast) and other outdoor spaces. Second, as many eNGOs had members

that had environmental expertise, regulators considered them as potential assistants in environmental monitoring and control. Hence, one regulator highlighted informal arrangements focused on a specific task: *all non-commercial organizations … we have an informal social network; to preserve the national park* (Regulator H, Samara Oblast). At times this form of engagment resulted in informal collaborations, effectively taking on/over some of the regulators monitoring and control activities:

> What is good about social organizations is that they are not strictly controlled … so they can visit places, take photos, and then report their point of view. (Regulator N, Samara Oblast)

Others stated that this process was more formalised, that they are *working with an ecological non-government public organization for monitoring environmental pollution* (Regulator G, Samara Oblast). Some were even more explicit about the nature of this relationship, stating that *these organizations* [eNGOs] *are our assistants* (Regulator L, Volgograd Oblast; emphasis added) and so it was essential that they only worked with *public organizations where clever, rational people are … there is no sense in staging demonstrations* (Regulator K, Volgograd Oblast).

At first glance, the regulator's perception of eNGOs appears more positive than that of firms. Regulators certainly point to more joint projects and co-operation between themselves and eNGOs; regulators were less dismissive of eNGOs, yet there are some caveats to consider. First, regulators do not allude to any instances where eNGOs have been part of or have influenced "processes and structures of public policy decision making" (Emerson, Nabatchi, and Balogh 2012, 2). This is perhaps not surprising given that many studies that looked at other areas of Russian civil society under the Putin administration come to similar conclusions (Ljubownikow and Crotty 2016; Henderson 2008; Pape 2018; Skokova, Pape, and Krasnopolskaya 2018; Flikke 2018; Kulmala and Tarasenko 2016). Instead, eNGOs played the role of assistants and assessors – rather than equal partners in collaborative environmental governance arrangements. They assisted with improving the quality of public spaces – something akin to the old Soviet practise of *subbotniki*, where citizens would engage in community service on the weekends, cleaning public spaces and repairing public amenities – and assessing environmental conditions on the state's behalf. Although both these activities are examples of co-creation and resemble a form of collaborative governance engagement, regulators viewed eNGOs as subservient to them, not as equal collaborators in a two-way process that could contribute new knowledge about local environmental problems or contribute to the development and diffusion of best practice (Bodin 2017). We explore the implications of this and our findings vis-à-vis firms below.

## Conclusion

In this paper, we focus on collaborative environmental governance (or lack thereof) in the Russian Federation. Research has illustrated that in political contexts like the Russian Federation, governance arrangements are often finely balanced to simultaneous encourage (to strengthen the state's governance (Dai and Spires 2018; Zeng, Dai, and Javed 2019)) and suppress NGO activities (those that weaken or challenge the state's legitimacy). Against the backdrop of the legacy of environmental damage in Russia, coupled with weak regulatory enforcement and the primacy given to natural resource extraction, we

examined how firms and regulators *perceive* eNGOs as a precursor to collaborative environmental governance. Our findings highlight that firms rarely include environmental NGOs in their environmental or social activities or decision-making because they *perceive* them largely as ineffective, invisible, or irrelevant. Regulators engage with eNGOs but do not see them as equal partners able to contribute to collaborative governance arrangements. Instead, they view them as assistants to help the state with its regulatory enforcement (a way to offset lacking governance capability (Braithwaite 2011; Levi-Faur 2009; Phillips 2006)). So rather than seeing eNGOs as being able to provide "expertise-based inputs" (Hochstetler 2013, 269) that could shape both policy and its enforcement, local regulators saw eNGOs as subservient. This was exemplified by the view that eNGOs were helpful in ensuring the quality of public spaces (i.e. getting eNGO involved as litter pickers) and the monitoring of pollution (i.e. getting eNGOs to record pollution incidence and report to them).

Sadly, it would seem that the firm's view of eNGOs has not changed in more than two decades. ENGOs are still perceived as invisible or irrelevant and thus not involved in decision-making (Crotty 2003b; Henry and Sundstrom 2021a). However, the root of this current exclusion is different than it was 20 years ago. In the late 1990s, market mechanisms and reforms were still in their infancy. As firms attempted to navigate these changes, the NGO voice was drowned out or had no channel through which to communicate. Nowadays, it is easier for firms to *not* engage with eNGOs, given that doing so carries risks and the potential for negative spill-overs for the firm should the eNGO fall foul of the state (Moser and Skripchenko 2018; Tysiachniouk, Tulaeva, and Henry 2018). The outcome, however, is that firms remain the purveyors of their social responsibility activities onto communities/stakeholders, rather than doing those activities with communities/stakeholders and co-creating solutions. The absence of stakeholder involvement and the lack of concrete examples emanating from the discourse in this study indicate that collaborative environmental governance in the Russian Federation remain exceptional.

Similar considerations also shaped regulators' approach to eNGOs. These can be mitigated by contracting eNGOs to provide a service within specific parameters rather than by co-creating activities or governance. Moreover, with a dearth of large active nationwide eNGOs, the small and locally focused organisations, such as those alluded to in this study, often lack a power base to exert direct or indirect pressure on firms or regulator to act. Relatedly, it is easy for both firms and regulators to exclude eNGOs or to limit their autonomy by making them occupy a role that suits the firm or regulator.

Our conclusions, of course, need to be seen in light of the limitations of this study. A larger sample, a different methodological approach and different regional areas may have produced different insights into the role eNGOs play. In this study, we focused on the perceptions firms and regulators have of eNGOs. We took this approach because the existing research on NGOs in the Russian Federation suggests that firms and regulators tend to be the most powerful societal actors because they control the resources (both firms and state agents), they have the ability to interpret regulatory guidance vis-à-vis environmental protection (the regulator) (Daucé 2015; Romanov and Iarskaia-Smirnova 2015; Tysiachniouk, Tulaeva, and Henry 2018; Moser and Skripchenko 2018). Future research could examine other national contexts that have similar hybrid regime characteristics to the Russian Federation to explore if and how environmental collaborative governance arrangements operate in these locations.

These limitations notwithstanding, our paper illustrates many of the issues that non-governmental environmental protection organisations face in the Russian Federation. As we state at the outset of this paper, collaborative environmental governance only works if the various societal actors acknowledge the existence of their compatriots and engage with each other on equal terms. With firms viewing eNGOs as largely irrelevant and the state viewing them merely as "assistants", the scope for genuine collaborative environmental governance in the Russian Federation, at least in this time, appears limited.

## Notes

1. Antimodern networks emerge in contexts characterized by the organisational failure and corruption of formal institutions (Rose 2000). In such a context, antimodern networks enabled agents such as firms to draw on informal, often pre-existing, relationships (in the case of Russia often based around networks to circumvent authorities, the state, or to extract resources from the state (Yurchak 2002)) to compensate for organisational or institutional failures of the state (Rose 2000).
2. Hybrid regimes attempt to shape civil society and its actors within (i.e. NGOs) to align to the regime's needs (Desrues 2013; Hale 2010; Karl 1995; Owen and Bindman 2017; Wilde et al. 2018). Key to this is the use of regulatory instruments designed to limit NGO action (Karl 1995; Wilde et al. 2018; Crotty and Ljubownikow 2020; Moser and Skripchenko 2018; Flikke 2018) as well as more informal pressure to shape and direct their activities, usually via resource provision (Fröhlich and Skokova 2020; Ljubownikow and Crotty 2017; Xiaojun and Ge 2016; Howell 2016; He and Thøgersen 2010; Salamon, Skokova, and Krasnopolskaya 2020; Tarasenko 2018; Toepler and Fröhlich 2020; Ljubownikow and Crotty 2016). Hybrid regimes, also known as participatory authoritarian regimes (Mainwaring 2012; Owen 2018; Xiaojun and Ge 2016), combine characteristics of participatory democratic governance (regular elections) with authoritarian tendencies (limits on freedom of association) (Diamond 2002; Wigell 2008).
3. In 2012 the Russian state implemented a law commonly termed as *foreign agent law*, which was followed up in 2015 by the creation of a law generally termed as *law on undesirable organizations* (Tysiachniouk, Tulaeva, and Henry 2018; Flikke 2018; Luhn 2015). These laws enable the state to designate NGOs and even individuals as anti-Russian or foreign agents if they are deemed to engage in political activities deemed a threat to Russia's constitution, and if they have (even if only in the past) received financial resources from abroad for such activities (Daucé 2015; Flikke 2018; Romanov and Iarskaia-Smirnova 2015; Tysiachniouk, Tulaeva, and Henry 2018; Luhn 2015). In addition, this legal framework enables regulators to extrajudicially shut down organisations (law on undesirable organisations) or require them to signpost that they are foreign agents (law on foreign agents) – a term with negative cultural and Soviet connotations (Bennetts 2012).
4. Federal Law No.2 FZ "On Environmental Protection" was changed by amendments outlined in the Federal Law No.122 FZ, published on the 22nd August 2004. These changes, which took away the power of municipal authorities to undertake ecological controls within their territorial districts, came into power on the 1st January 2006. For further details, see www.consultant.ru, accessed 30th April 2021.
5. For details of the responsibilities of these two federal organs see, http://www.mnr.gov.ru/ andwww.gosnadzor.ru, accessed 30th April 2021.
6. Firms are referred to according to an assigned pseudonym indicative of their industry, such as "Automotive Factory A'. Regulators have each been randomly assigned a letter and are referred to as "Regulator A", for instance.

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## Appendices

### *Appendix 1: Regulators.*

| Identifier | Office and location |
|---|---|
| Regulator A | CLATM, Volgograd Oblast |
| Regulator B | Department of Subsoil Resources Management, Volgograd City |
| Regulator D | Ecological Department of Syzran City District, Samara Oblast |
| Regulator E | Ecology and Resource Management Department, Volgograd Oblast |
| Regulator F | Environmental Protection Inspection of Zhigulevsk urban district, Samara Oblast |
| Regulator G | Privolzhskiy Interregional Territorial Department, Samara Oblast |
| Regulator H | Municipal District Kinelskiy on Natural Resources and Ecology, Kinelskiy, Samara Oblast |
| Regulator I | Youth Politics, Sport and Culture, Tol'yatti, Samara Oblast |
| Regulator J | Municipal Environmental Policy Department, Volgograd |
| Regulator K | Head of Public and Local Officials' Relations Department, Samara City |
| Regulator L | Rosprirodnadzor (Federal) in Samara region |
| Regulator N | Social Ecology Unit, Volgograd Oblast |
| Regulator P | Social Support and Population Protection Department, Samara Oblast |
| Regulator Q | Department of Environment Protection, Volgograd Oblast |
| Regulator R | Water Resources Department, Samara City |
| Regulator S | Caucasian Mineral Waters, Stavropol Krai |
| Regulator T | Ecological Unit, Stavropol Krai |
| Regulator U | Ministry of Natural Resources and Environmental Protection (Federal) 1, Stavropol Krai |
| Regulator V | Ministry of Natural Resources and Environmental Protection (Federal)2, Stavropol Krai |
| Regulator W | Soil Quality Regulator, Stavropol Krai |
| Regulator X | Sanitary Committee Secretary, Stavropol City |

### *Appendix 2: Firms.*

| Identifier | Location |
|---|---|
| Aluminium 1 | Nevinnomyssk, Stavropol Krai |
| Aluminium 2 | Nevinnomyssk, Stavropol Krai |
| Aluminium 3 | Samara, Samara Oblast' |
| Aluminium 4 | Samara, Samara Oblast' |
| Asbestos 1 | Volzhskii, Volgograd Oblast' |
| Automobile 1 | Tol'yatti, Samara Oblast' |
| Automobile 2 | Tol'yatti, Samara Oblast' |

(*Continued*)

Continued.

| Identifier | Location |
|---|---|
| Automobile 3 | Tol'yatti, Samara Oblast' |
| Automobile 4 | Tol'yatti, Samara Oblast' |
| Ceramics 1 | Samara, Samara Oblast' |
| Chemical 1 | Volzhskii, Volgograd Oblast' |
| Chemical 2 | Volzhskii, Volgograd Oblast' |
| Chemical 3 | Volgograd, Volgograd Oblast' |
| Chemical 4 | Volgograd, Volgograd Oblast' |
| Chemical 5 | Nevinnomyssk, Stavropol Krai |
| Chemical 6 | Nevinnomyssk, Stavropol Krai |
| Chemical 7 | Samara, Samara Oblast' |
| Chemical 8 | Novokuibyshevsk, Samara Oblast' |
| Construction 1 | Stavropol, Stavropol Krai |
| Cosmetics 1 | Novokuibyshevsk, Samara Oblast' |
| Cosmetics 2 | Nevinnomyssk, Stavropol Krai |
| Engineering 1 | Novokuibyshevsk, Samara Oblast' |
| Engineering 2 | Svetlograd, Stavropol Krai |
| Food Processing 1 | Stavropol, Stavropol Krai |
| Food Processing 2 | Svetlograd, Stavropol Krai |
| Lime Processing 1 | Zhigulevsk, Samara Oblast' |
| Metal Working 1 | Volzhskii, Volgograd Oblast' |
| Metal Working 2 | Svetlograd, Stavropol Krai |
| Natural Resources 1 | Volgograd, Volgograd Oblast' |
| Natural Resources 2 | Volgograd, Volgograd Oblast' |
| Natural Resources 3 | Budennovsk, Stavropol Krai |
| Natural Resources 4 | Novokuibyshevsk, Samara Oblast' |
| Natural Resources 5 | Novokuibyshevsk, Samara Oblast' |
| Natural Resources 6 | Samara, Samara Oblast' |
| Natural Resources 7 | Samara, Samara Oblast' |
| Natural Resources 8 | Novokuibyshevsk, Samara Oblast' |
| Pipe Factory 1 | Volgograd, Volgograd Oblast' |
| Plastics 1 | Syzran, Samara Oblast' |
| Quarry 1 | Zhiguliovsk, Samara Oblast' |
| Ship Builders 1 | Volgograd, Volgograd Oblast' |
| Tractor Factory 1 | Volgograd, Volgograd Oblast' |
| Waste Processing 1 | Samara, Samara Oblast' |
| Waste Processing 2 | Tol'yatti, Samara Oblast' |