

**Commentary on Thesis Entitled *Happy Recipients?*  
(*Western Democracy Assistance, Ukrainian Advocacy NGOs, and the Orange  
Revolution*) by Olga Smirnova**

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**Overview**

This thesis addresses a very significant issue of relevance not only to Ukraine but to societies all over the world in which NGOs are actively engaged in various types of „democratization“ assistance, often with financial and logistical support from foreign donors whose motives are neither nonpartisan nor divorced from other geopolitical interests and objectives. Many citizens, NGO advocates, and even some NGO scholars have tacitly accepted the rather naive notion that NGOs are universally open, ethical, politically neutral players, and fully accountable for their activities. But a growing body of research is suggesting that NGOs often have strong political agendas, sometimes tied to the ideology of their funding sources, and that their record of accountability and transparency is mixed at best. This is the case not only in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe but in Africa, Asia, Latin America, and of course the Middle East.

Ms. Smirnova has examined the role of advocacy NGOs in Ukraine during and following the 2004 uprising. She has done a very credible job of reviewing the literature on NGO roles in democratization efforts in Eastern Europe. I find that the body of her thesis is particularly impressive for its review of the literature and its analysis of myriad political and social forces in Ukraine. I believe, however, that her fundamental research question (i.e., dealing with attitudes of NGOs toward the funding they received) to be rather vaguely stated. Her research questionnaire contains some questions that are vague and others that are biased toward certain responses. I also am concerned that the organizations interviewed for the thesis are not necessarily a representative sample. Data triangulation, using additional data collection methods such as content analysis of local newspapers, in depth review of official public records of the NGOs, and perhaps interviews with stakeholders other than the NGO leaders would have created more confidence in the findings.

**Strong Points**

Personally, I found the most compelling portion of the thesis to be Parts I, II, III, and IV. In these sections of the thesis, Ms. Smirnova does a fine job of describing the social, political, and economic history of Ukraine. Her description of the „East – West“ thesis and its variations shows an insider’s sophistication. I am particularly impressed by her grasp of the important contributions to the literature on NGOs and their so-called independence and nonpartisanship. Many scholars are now beginning to question this assumption and expose it as naive. Ms. Smirnova has identified and digested many of the most important contributors, including a few who are not as well known. This part of the thesis is also quite well written, and follows a clear and precise logic. Anecdotally, there

were several points in this portion of her thesis where I made some marginal suggestion or comment, only to discover that Ms. Smirnova had fully addressed my concern in a subsequent paragraph or on following page. This happened several times and gradually built my confidence in her ability to not only do fine bibliographic research, but to think independently and critically about what she is reading.

I am also impressed by Ms. Smirnova's conclusions. Here she has shown that she has the objectivity and maturity to question her original thesis and to embrace evidence that might contradict some of her initial assumptions and propositions. Also, I believe Ms. Smirnova has done quite a nice job of posing some recommendations for how to improve the role of NGOs in democratization efforts.

### **Weak Points**

In my opinion, the weakest parts of the thesis are the introduction (where the research question is described) and Part V (which reports on the interviews).

The statement of the central research question lacks precision and relevance. Essentially, the research question seems to be something like: „Do the NGOs that received foreign funding to assist in democratization efforts have any regrets about receiving the funding, or are they perfectly happy with the situation?“ (This question is also implied in the title of her thesis.) On page 9 of the document, she says that she is interested in the „personal attitudes“ of those who received foreign assistance, but she does not specify exactly whose personal attitudes are of interest to her or why those personal attitudes are important.

First of all, whose „attitudes“ are we talking about? Ms. Smirnova seems to suggest that the NGOs themselves (as organizations) have something called „attitudes“ or beliefs and values, but of course the NGOs are collections of many individuals who likely have widely divergent attitudes, beliefs, values, etc... Therefore, is she interested in the chief administrator's attitudes versus the attitudes of, say, a board member (if applicable) or a worker? This is not clearly described nor justified theoretically. In other words, why should we care about those attitudes? Why should we believe that those attitudes would be any different today than they were the day the money was received?

It seems to me that some research from the field of cognitive psychology is relevant here. For example, the concept of *cognitive dissonance* suggests that people tend to feel increasingly uncomfortable when the choices they have already made seem to be at odds with a growing evidence that the choice was a mistake. The theory suggests that people often try to relieve the internal conflict that they feel by constructing additional arguments to justify the choices they have made. Could the concept of cognitive dissonance explain why the interviewees were so dismissive of the criticisms of foreign aid? I don't know the answer to this, but I raise it as an example of how Ms. Smirnova has not adequately embedded her research question within a theoretical or practical framework.

Perhaps more importantly, Ms. Smirnova offers no conceptual, theoretical, or operational definition for the „attitudes“ that she proposes to measure. An attitude can be a remarkably complex *construct* with widely varying operational definitions, each of which contains deeply embedded assumptions. For example, the interviewees might have attitudes about the operational mechanics of applying for and receiving foreign aid, about the ideological strings attached to that aid, about the dependency that the aid can create, about the effect of the aid on the mission and internal management capacity of the NGO, about how expenditure of the aid is accounted for, about the demands for outcome measurement, and so on. At one point (p. 10) Ms. Smirnova says that she is interested in whether recipients believe that the aid helped Ukraine to be „more democratic“. This construct of „more democratic“ is of course hugely complicated, with a very large number of embedded assumptions about its meaning and how to measure it.

This brings me to her interview protocol and the sample of organizations selected for interviews. I am generally familiar with qualitative research and the method of semi-structured interviews. Thus, I can imagine that the interview protocol used by Ms. Smirnova probably elicited a great deal of discussion with richness and depth that is not necessarily reflected in the interview protocol. However, even with this understanding, the interview protocol seems very general to me and not very effective in eliciting the underlying attitudes, beliefs, values, and opinions of the interviewees regarding the aid their NGO received.

For example, when Ms. Smirnova asked whether the NGO received criticism from outside stakeholders, she could have asked the respondent to do some stakeholder „mapping“ in terms of their respective positions, their perceived power, and their expressed support or opposition to the NGOs policies and actions. She might have done some content analysis of news reports or other publications to test the extent to which the outside criticism was deemed legitimate enough by the media to report on. She could have interviewed some of the outside stakeholders to uncover the exact nature of their criticism. In other words, I find the questions in the interview protocol to be far too general to yield any objective insights on the original research question. Frankly, I was not too surprised when interviewees essentially defended their decision to accept the foreign aid and to disregard the criticism they had received from outside stakeholders.

Finally, I lack enough information on how the interviewees were selected to make any real judgments about their responses. Was this a purposive sample? Do the selected organizations constitute the universe of organizations that received Western aid? Was there any random component to the selection process? Was it a snowball sample? Were the interviewees in any way representative of the wider population of NGOs in terms of size, resources, professionalism, etc.?

## **Conclusions**

Ms. Smirnova has done a fine job of reviewing the literature on NGO involvement in democratization efforts, and applied that literature to the Ukrainian context. I have deep concerns about the validity of the interview results because of problems with the

interview protocol and the sampling methods. Moreover, I have some concerns about the ambiguity of the central research question. Essentially, I do not believe that Ms. Smirnova answered the central question that she poses at the beginning of the thesis. So, in that strict sense her thesis fails to accomplish its stated objective. On the other hand, these serious weaknesses in the thesis might be compensated for by the quality of the literature review and the maturity displayed by Ms. Smirnova in embracing apparent evidence that contradicts her original assumptions.

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*March 21, 2007*