

Russia's Law on "Undesirable Foreign NGOs" and the Ethics of International Activism

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The decision by Russian President Vladimir Putin to sign a bill that allows "[authorities to prosecute foreign non-governmental organizations \(NGOs\) or firms designated as 'undesirable' on national security grounds](#)" is bound to receive a hostile reception in the West. Already Amnesty International" declared that the new law will "[snatch away the space for dissenting views and independent civil society activism](#)," while Human Rights Watch more hysterically stated that the law aims at "[squeezing the very life out of Russian civil society](#)," and the State Department harshly characterized it in a characteristically over the top fashion "[as a further example of the Russian government's growing crackdown on independent voices and intentional steps to isolate the Russian people from the world](#)."

Dramatic statements aside, we may want to ask, quite separately from the case with this Russian law, what could be considered as proper boundaries for engagement by international activists. In other words, the increasing power of NGOs in the post-Cold War period, manifest in their ever mounting number in operation and handling of ever more substantial quantities of money, raises questions about the roles and responsibilities of these new global, non-state actors. In particular, there is the question of developing an ethics of international activism that would facilitate moral assessments of the endeavors by agents operating in countries other than their own.

[Elsewhere I have argued](#) in favor of developing an ethics of international activism, which involved a process of formulating a series of constraints on what would constitute morally permissible agency in the context that includes delivering services abroad, directly or indirectly. In elaborating these ethical constraints I relied on the concept of "force multiplier." The content of this idea and its official applications have explanatory importance in considering the correlation between post-Cold War phenomenal growth in the number of international NGOs and the emergence of the U.S. as the sole, unchallenged super-power ushering in the new "unipolar" world.

The fully developed proposal for an "ethics of international activism" consists of four constraints on morally permissible international activism:

(C1) *The Professionalism Constraint;*

(C2); *The Integrity Constraint;*

(C3) *The Respect for Sovereignty Constraint; and*

(C4) *The Humility Constraint.*

As soon as these constraints are understood and correctly analyzed, an overarching principle emerges helping us realize that *local activism must enjoy normative primacy* (in all three normative spheres: moral, legal, and political) over international activism. At the same time, this gives us an idea of how to conceive of what could constitute legitimate international activism, that is one that respects the primacy of local activism.

Before introducing in a bit greater detail the elements of this ethics of international activism let us define “international activists” as altruists attracted by causes that originate in foreign lands. By calling them “altruists” I do not intend to prejudge the actions of international activists as necessarily morally good; I simply mean to indicate that they are ostensibly acting out of concern for the welfare of others, in this case those others are foreigners. We can make further progress in delineating more exactly who the “international activists” are by making more precise this notion of “causes that originate in foreign lands.” Most frequently those causes are expressed in terms of global protection, and respect for human rights. Thus, Amnesty International defines itself as a “global movement” of people [“campaigning for a world where human rights are enjoyed by all,”](#) while Human Rights Watch claims that it [“works as part of a vibrant movement to uphold human dignity and advance the cause of human rights for all.”](#)

We can achieve additional clarity by realizing that governments can also show interest in those same causes expressed in terms of *human rights*, but we would not count government administrators, operating in their official capacities, among “international activists”. Thus, The Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor of the U.S. government, states that [“protecting human rights around the world \[is\] central to U.S. foreign policy,”](#) yet we would not consider State Department officials “international activists”. This is why organizations that want to count as groupings of international activists are quick to assert their *independence*. Consequently, international activists are not meant to be government officials, ideologues, corporate lobbyists, or missionaries on behalf of any religion; in fact, international activists are supposed to operate independently of any government, ideology, corporation, and religion. In the first instance, this then poses strong constraints on how to construe an ethics of international activism starting with *The Professionalism Constraints*:



Gene Sharp was the mastermind of the disastrous regime change techniques which led to drastic fall in living standards and factual failures of states in Tunisia, Yemen, Egypt, Libya, Syria and Ukraine

(C1) It is considered morally impermissible for international activists to act on behalf of any government, ideology, corporation, or religion.

It stands to reason that if a person is genuinely motivated by the welfare of others from a country other than her own, then she must not be acting on behalf of her (or any other) government, should not promote any ideology (be it political, economic or otherwise), nor proselytize in favor of a religion. Thus, for example, international activists must not propagate in favor of a regime change in a country where such policy is pursued by, say, the U.S. government; they must not engage in promoting the economic ideology of free market and privatization in, say, a country with the socialist economic system (or any other); or attempt to convert, say, local Muslim population to Christianity.

In order to introduce the second constraint the notion of *force multiplier* must be introduced;

it is a military term, defined as follows in [*The Oxford Essential Dictionary of the U.S. Military*](#):

A capability that, when added to and employed by a combat force, significantly increases the combat potential of that force and thus enhances the probability of successful mission accomplishment.

It is not difficult to document that this military term is widely used by [U.S. officials](#), including a Democratic [U.S. President](#), [right wing think tankers](#), various academics, and even [international activists](#) themselves, suggesting that the Western NGOs do and should serve as force multipliers for U.S. armed forces in the variety of theaters of operations where the latter are continuously active. This, however, stands in direct opposition to the definitional component of “international activism” as agency that stems from concern for the welfare of others in foreign countries. The integrity of their actions is threatened if international activists operate in concert with U.S. armed forces or for the sake of U.S. government while ostensibly engaged to address basic needs of less fortunate humans in other countries. Consequently, an explicit moral constraint—*The Integrity Constraint*—defining the way international activists can satisfy the requirements of minimal integrity of their actions is necessary:

(C2) It is considered morally impermissible for international activists to serve as force multipliers for U.S. (or any other) armed forces or U.S. (or any other) government.

It is perhaps clear that *The Integrity Constraint* is already implied by *The Professionalism Constraint*. However, given the aggressive push by the U.S. officials to employ international activists as force multipliers, the impact of the phenomenon of revolving doors between government service and positions within human rights organizations, and the apparent happy acquiescence by many international activists to their newly given (post-Cold War) role, it is important to make *The Integrity Constraint* explicit.

Once human rights become indistinguishable from official political ideology, once human rights culture is usurped by the dominant powers, and once the argument for human rights is turned into an apologia for the imperial project by the sole super power while this transformation is not protested but supported by international activists in the Western countries, this gives us a clear sense of international activists serving as force multipliers or being “belligerent altruists”. However, the tension captured by this term must be resolved, and this brings us to the next constraint on the morally permissible character of international activism. In order to accomplish this we must remove the belligerent character of the post-Cold War practice by human rights organizations. We must counsel a return to the human rights discourse that respects sovereignty of nation states and permits at most “soft” intervention while opposing all attempts at decriminalizing aggression (through “humanitarian intervention,” R2P, “war on terrorism,” or similar constructs) and making sure that activists are not aiding and abetting aggression under any circumstances. This could be called *Respect for Sovereignty Constraint*:

(C3) It is considered morally impermissible for international activists to disrespect sovereignty, aid and abet aggression, and engage in anything beyond “soft” intervention.

To advance further with our goal of developing an ethics of international activism that would facilitate moral assessments of their endeavors we may engage in moral phenomenology of international activism. Moral phenomenology is the study of the experiential aspects of

moral life. By investigating “what it is like” to undergo mental states that instantiate phenomenal properties when, say, judging that one “must engage” we might be able to formulate further moral constraints that can guide our moral evaluation of what international activists do. The idea is that the construction of constraints on moral permissibility of acting *qua* international activist can be aided via compelling phenomenological descriptions of specific experiential episodes.

By paying attention to moral phenomenology of activism a picture emerges according to which, for the activist, given the axiological nature of the cause for which she is fighting, all that is required to set her on the right path is that she be sincere and firm in her decision. Are there no obstacles to getting the purpose right, to honing in on what is unquestionably the right goal to make personal sacrifices for? What could be the source of such infallible knowledge or the experience that appears as if one is in the possession of it? These are appropriate questions! For, the activist possesses not only a firm conviction that the cause is right, but also a persuasion that no consideration could possibly put it in question.

The position is tantamount to a person who has all the answers in advance, with no need to engage in the search for evidence. It is a position that readily presents answers, while the procedure that supplied them remains forever hidden, unexplored, and insignificant. Does this, therefore, mean that it isn’t, strictly speaking, important *what will really be achieved* (as in the saying “Don’t look a gift horse in the mouth”), but that whatever is accomplished is good enough—in the sense of being sufficient and not open to moral assessment other than automatic praise? Put differently, since the activist’s motivation procures the act’s rightness and its goodness, does this mean that *there is no possible question to be raised here*? Or, that no argumentation of any kind is required or possible in this case? The last remark indicates an *ideological* character of the situation—we are trading in a context wherein *reasons* do not function in their customary fashion, or not at all. This appears to make activism akin to ideology.

This discovered link between international activism and disposition to uncritical adoption of ideology indicates that the principal danger international activists face is their vulnerability to cooption by big powers through usurpation of the main (ideological) tenets that define *sumum bonum* on behalf of which they activate. In light of *The Professionalism Constraint* international activists are morally required to prevent such cooption and usurpation, but the ideological nature of activism substantially reduces the resistance capacity by activists in this respect. Hence, it should not be surprising that they end up converted into force multipliers with such ease. However, there is a defense available to them that could enhance their integrity and consists in the practice of humility. If activists avoid the attitude of epistemic arrogance with respect to the normative value of the cause they act to support, if they refuse to take their own comfort and conviction regarding the value of their cause as a sure mark of its unquestionable validity, they may have a way of protecting the moral purity of their engagement. This takes us to the final constraint in this exercise, to *The Humility Constraint*:

(C4) It is considered morally impermissible for international activists to take the strength of their conviction as a sufficient condition for the validity of their endeavor.

In light of the moral constraints, C1-C4, the overwhelmingly negative assessment of contemporary Western international activism is painfully obvious. If so, the question emerges, what must morally speaking be done about it? This question would have to be answered both from the perspective of the activists and those who find themselves on the

receiving end of these would-be-good-but-bad-Samaritans.

From the perspective of the Western activists we should advise the following. Just as the old American saying goes that “all politics is local” so all activism should be local. In fact, the overarching duty for any activist-minded Westerner may be to go local, and thus deprive the imperialist project of an important body of force multipliers.

On the other hand, if activities and projects by international activists hailing from the West cannot be deemed morally permissible, this should have *legal* consequences in the rest of the world: all countries outside the Empire, particularly countries targeted by international activists as potential theaters of their operations, ought to criminalize activities by international activists and “human rights organizations” on their territory when not in solidarity or in support of local movements. Paradoxically, the justification for this criminalization is grounded precisely in the real concern for the human rights of the inhabitants from those countries.

A clarification is in order at this point. When I state that all activism should be local this is not meant to preclude legitimate international activism. What I mean is to insist on *the primacy of local activism* in the sense that all international activism must recognize this primacy, and hence reduce itself to a supporting role. In short, the legitimate international activism engages in solidarity and support of pre-existing local movements. Recognizing this primacy of the local aspect of activism can be seen as the main condition of legitimacy for any international activism.

The conceptual apparatus and normative framework developed here can assist in diagnosing in a precise way what is wrong (morally speaking) with the Western “strategic non-violent action” and the projection of the so called “soft power”. In short, this design that uses non-violence as a form of warfare adopted by foreign policy makers in the U.S. who orchestrated various “color revolutions,” “Arab spring,” etc. must be deemed morally impermissible as it violates all four constraints developed and defended here and because it feigns respect for the *primacy of local* activism: while it is the local people that participate in a non-violent movement directed against their government, the movement itself is envisaged, funded, and its “local” leaders are trained by foreign organizations.

Returning now to the Russian law on the undesirable foreign NGOs, rather than quickly dismissing it as an assault on dissent, civil society or anything else we could avoid drama and hysteria by using the conceptual apparatus offered here in order to assess whether the response to international activism is excessive or legitimate, which at the same time gives us a very precise sense of what is rightly “undesirable”. To the extent that foreign NGOs violate the provision of the primacy of the local activism and the four moral constraints, issuing restrictions in the form of legal means may be entirely justified and defensible. In fact, this is a practice that would in all probability be justified the world over, in particular in what I like to call the “once developing world” (before they become victims of imposed neoliberal economic models) where the Western human rights organizations have been operating in total impunity.

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