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Bankrolling the Belgrade Bandits? Civil Society, NGOs, and Foreign Aid Localization in Serbia

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ABSTRACT

This article examines how foreign aid professionalized Serbia's civil society sector and analyzes how Serbian NGOs navigate upward accountability to donors and downward accountability to grassroots communities. Drawing upon 11 months of ethnographic fieldwork in Serbia, I demonstrate how the administrative bureaucracies of foreign aid constructed a sector of managerial NGOs that are relatively removed from local communities. Nonetheless, I suggest that the staff members of NGOs are mission-driven and mission-oriented, and I unveil the strategies they use to support social change at grassroots levels. Arguing that NGOs are neither the schools of democracy envisioned by neo-Tocquevillian theories of civil society, nor the lucrative industries portrayed by critical theories of civil society, I suggest that NGOs are best understood as bridges between foreign donors and grassroots communities. I reflect on the implications of these arguments for donors' aid localization strategies.

In March 2023, I met the deputy director of a Serbian democracy promotion nongovernmental organization (NGO). The deputy was in his thirties, well educated, and conversant in English and the languages of democracy and human rights. He wore stylish jeans, brand-name sneakers, and an Apple Watch with a bright orange strap. The deputy's meeting with me was one of several he had scheduled that day. After our interview, he would meet a European ambassador. In May, he would be part of a delegation of Serbian civil society members who met with United States Agency for International Development (USAID) Administrator Samantha Power during her tour through the Western Balkans. The deputy attended conferences across Western Europe where, in the few breaks in his busy days, he enjoyed visiting museums and sipping cappuccinos.

I quickly labeled the deputy as a typical staff member of a professional NGO: someone who carries out Western-funded projects and spends most of his time conducting research, writing reports, leading campaigns, evaluating results, and courting donors. The type of NGO for which the deputy works represents what one U.S. government official termed, a "Belgrade Bandit." Just like the "Beltway Bandits" (international NGOs and contracting firms that carry out U.S. government-funded projects guzzle funds from various government agencies), the so-called "Belgrade Bandits" consume much of the foreign aid that targets Serbian NGOs and, in turn, carry out projects designed by foreign donors.

The NGO deputy was typical of most staff of professional NGOs. But he was more than that. While he conducted professional

activities and circulated in a milieu of international democracy promotion and development elites, the deputy also remained staunchly focused on, and personally committed to, the NGO's mission of advancing democracy and safeguarding human rights in Serbia.

Midway through our conversation, the deputy digressed, and I had an ah-hah moment. Explaining his path to becoming the number two staff member at one of Serbia's most prominent democracy promotion NGOs, the deputy told me about his youth. He teared in nostalgia as he spoke about the village in northeast Serbia where he grew up. His tears flowed when he told me about his parents, who were "anti-regime, anti-war, communist intellectuals" (March 23, 2023). The deputy developed an activist mentality himself and, after high school, worked at various international NGOs operating in Serbia. He was disillusioned. "Most INGO staff have fancy degrees, but they don't work very hard," he said. While clearly well educated, the deputy has no advanced degree. And he wanted to work for an organization that was driven by mission, not by financial incentives to carry out projects bankrolled by international donors.

NGOs have come under fire in recent years. Critical civil society scholarship—some that I authored—documents and critiques the rise of professional, bureaucratic NGOs that are more upwardly accountable to donors than downwardly accountable to local people (Atia and Herrold 2018; Herrold 2022; Zencirci and Herrold 2022). This article reflects my updated and more nuanced thinking about the benefits and drawbacks of NGO professionalism. After my conversation with the deputy at the democracy promotion NGO, I continued to hear from NGO staff about the challenges and opportunities they faced in navigating between international donors and local constituents. I consistently met staff members who were passionate about advancing their organization's missions and their constituents' priorities and who worked tirelessly and creatively to channel donors' funds toward those ends. I also heard from staff and volunteers at grassroots groups who indicated that their organizations could not survive without support from the more professional, Belgrade-based NGOs.

Armed with these perspectives, I realized that professional NGOs are not only professional, bureaucratic institutions that respond to donors. They are also scrappy, creative organizations led by people who are deeply committed to social change in Serbia.[1]

I therefore pursued three research questions. First, how do NGO staff juggle the professional bureaucracies of foreign aid and the gritty work of advancing local priorities and supporting local people? Second, how do professional NGOs use their funds, technical expertise, and networks to help grow and sustain the work of grassroots organizations? Third, what are the implications for foreign aid localization?

In the forthcoming pages, I confirm that the foreign aid that flows to Serbian civil society organizations did professionalize the sector. I then address the first two research questions. Taking the reader inside Serbia's NGOs, I reveal staff members' passionate commitment to social change and analyze creative ways they use foreign aid to support grassroots organizations and everyday people throughout Serbia. While future work will more deeply analyze implications for aid localization, I reflect on those briefly in this article.

In the first section, I contrast the liberal and critical theories of civil society that frame my research. I then provide an overview of Serbian civil society and introduce the methods I used to conduct this research. Three empirical sections analyze the professionalization, humanization, and localization of Serbian NGOs. I conclude by considering implications of the article's findings for theory and practice.

1 | Theorizing NGOs: From Democratization to Professionalization

In 1831, Frenchman Alexis de Tocqueville visited America. After touring the country for 9 months, in 1835 he published his treatise, *Democracy in America* (de Tocqueville 1835). De Tocqueville reflected that the vibrancy of American democracy rested partly on its many voluntary associations. Through these myriad associations, Americans gathered around common interests. In these organizations, de Tocqueville argued, Americans were schooled in democratic citizenship as they expressed different viewpoints, identified shared priorities, and worked collectively to advance their common interests.

Over the ensuing centuries, America's associational sphere grew into a large and established nonprofit sector. Today, nonprofits provide a variety of social services that in other countries fall under the purview of the government. They work in fields of education, health care, arts and culture, agriculture, environmental protection, economic development, sports and leisure, and more. America's heavy reliance on private nonprofit organizations to deliver services can be read as the natural result of Americans' preference for small government. But it can also be read as being part and parcel of a democracy in which citizens embrace agency over the development, diversity, and sustainability of their communities. Through nonprofit organizations, Americans work collectively for the common good. As they do, democracy benefits.

Scholarship identifies the mechanisms through which America's nonprofit organizations enhance democracy. Some of this work highlights the social capital—or norms of trust, tolerance, and reciprocity—that nonprofits cultivate (Fukuyama 2001; Graddy and Wang 2009; Putnam 1993). Nonprofit organizations also project citizens' voices in policy making spheres (Berry and Arons 2003; Goss 2007, 2016). Nonprofits can serve as sites of mobilization, where members identify shared grievances and band together to advocate for changes to public policies that address these grievances (Dodge and Ospina 2016; Goss 2008, 2020). By generating the social capital that facilitates cooperative civic engagement and by creating arenas in which members become advocates for policy change, nonprofits essentially act as schools of democracy and undergird healthy liberal democracies (Andrews et al. 2010; Dodge and Ospina 2016; King and Griffin 2019; Putnam 2000).

Guided by these arguments, Western aid agencies funded the expansion of nonprofit, or NGO, sectors around the world

(Carothers 2004, 2009; Diamond 1999; Herrold 2020). Their logic featured several components. First, NGOs could act as act as schools of democracy and introduce people in non-democracies to the habits and practices of democratic citizenship. Second, NGOs could act as watchdogs over the state, calling out autocratic tendencies or other abuses of power. In a third and similar vein, NGOs could create spaces for citizens to mobilize social movements to press for policy change. And fourth, by their very proliferation, NGOs could inject a healthy degree of pluralism in a country's civil society.

But the associational revolution did not turn out as hoped. Savvy autocratic rulers are part of the problem. A variety of co-optation and control mechanisms—from restrictive regulations to extensive monitoring systems, incentives to focus on governments' economic development agendas, media campaigns, and outright harassment of NGO staff—allow government officials to keep close watch over NGOs and prevent them from forming an oppositional force for democracy (Albrecht 2005; Brumberg 2002; Herrold 2016; Teets 2014; Wiktorowicz 2002).

But governments aren't the only barriers to strengthening civic engagement and building democracy through NGOs. Donors themselves are part of the problem. Instead of seeding the types of member-run, grassroots organizations that cultivate budding democrats, foreign aid produces professional, bureaucratic, and depoliticized organizations that are today more accountable to their international donors than to the local people they claim to serve (AbouAssi and Trent 2016; Atia and Herrold 2018; Bornstein 2003; Chahim and Prakash 2014; Ebrahim 2005; Elbers and Arts 2011; Stroup and Wong 2017; Suarez and Gugerty 2016). Such organizations in the realm of service provision engage in neoliberal forms of "development," delivering social services in place of the state in ways that aim to be efficient, effective, and scalable (Atia 2013; Herrold 2020; Srinivas 2022; Zencirci 2024).[2] For their part, democracy promotion NGOs implement "tame" projects unlikely to mobilize large numbers of people or engage citizens directly in sustained practices of civic engagement and democracy building (Bush 2015; Carapico 2012, 2014).

To be eligible for foreign aid, NGOs must be relatively professional and managerial (Alexander, Nank, and Stivers 2004; Banks, Hulme, and Edwards 2015; Bratton 1989; Herrold 2022; Stroup and Wong 2017). Grant applications require organizations to convey their work in terms of business plans. Grants typically fund specific, short-term projects, not organizations' general operating costs, and for each project applicants must identify project goals and lay out theories of change (Bebbington 1997; Krause 2014; Stiles 2002). Grant applicants must create budgets that project all revenues and expenses directly related to the project. Anticipated challenges of completing the project successfully, and proposals of how to overcome those challenges, are also typically included. Applicants must propose plans for how they will evaluate success and account for failures (AbouAssi 2013; Ebrahim 2005).

Funders maintain standards for the thoroughness of grant applications and to meet those requirements NGO staff must be highly educated and trained. Most speak English and are also fluent in the vocabularies of international development and democracy building (Henderson 2002; Jad 2007). Some are skilled in finance, others in project management, and still others in evaluating impact (Bano 2008; Bornstein 2003). Top NGO executives often dress like businesspeople and fill their schedules with meetings with members of the international community. NGO staff are also skilled in communicating with the media. They issue press releases, lead trainings, appear on radio and television spots, and maintain contacts at local newspapers.

To house these staff members and their activities, most NGOs occupy professional spaces (Chahim and Prakash 2014; Hammami 1995; Hanafi and Tabar 2003). Offices are typically located in building complexes in capital cities or, in the case of smaller NGOs, in a town or city center. Offices are equipped with modern technology and visitors are often greeted by front-desk administrators and offered coffee or tea prepared by a dedicated kitchenette worker. NGOs have logos and maintain websites that showcase staff members, projects, and annual reports. Many organizations own vehicles. And they host events at fancy hotels and performance venues.

In addition to being professional, foreign-funded NGOs also tend to be bureaucratic (Banks, Hulme, and Edwards 2015). This is largely due to the short-term nature of projects. Donors typically fund projects that are 3 months to 1 year in length and NGOs generally juggle multiple projects at a time. As a result, NGOs wind up in cycles of project-related bureaucracy. Staff constantly juggle grant applications, project management, progress reports, and evaluations (Craig and Porter 1997; Krause 2014; Zencirci and Herrold 2022).

In sum, the modern NGOs subsidized by foreign aid tend not to be member-organized and member-led organizations that nurture habits and practices of civic engagement and democratic citizenship as members convene. Instead, today's NGOs are run by professional staff who spend time applying for grants, managing projects, complying with donors' monitoring schemes, and reporting on project results. These organizations are bureaucratic, devoting time, energy, and resources to managing grants. They organize their work not around members' priorities but rather around logic models, budgets, and evaluation plans for projects conceived by foreign donors. They are a far cry from the citizen-led grassroots groups that de Tocqueville celebrated.

2 | Researching Civil Society in Serbia

I focus this study on Serbia because it is the poster child of USAID's localization efforts. In 2015, the USAID Mission in Serbia participated in the first round of funding in USAID's Local Works program, an initiative that gives discretionary funds to missions to re-grant to local actors. The European Union (EU), donor agencies of various European states, USAID, and international private foundations channels enough funds to Serbian NGOs that without such support the sector could not survive. This gives international donors significant control over the financial and operational health of Serbia's NGO sector. Moreover, international donors describe Serbia as a success story of their localization strategies.

Serbia's NGO sector receives much less affection from the Serbian government, the Serbian Progressive Party, or SNS (Srpska Napredna Stranka). To be sure, the sector is vibrant. Estimates suggest that there are around 50,000 registered organizations with additional unregistered, informal associations operating at local levels. Serbian NGOs work across fields including culture, media, and recreation; education and research; environmental protection; social services; political and legal reform; human rights; health care; agriculture; community development; and philanthropy (Velat 2019).

The sector maintains this vibrancy not thanks to the government but despite it. Serbia's legal framework is unfavorable for civil society (Spasojević 2019). Serbia's Law of Associations allows the government to monitor NGOs' activities, finances, and governance. Informal government harassment—including directly from the government and indirectly through state media—weakens the sector's ability to be an oppositional force. Smear campaigns stoke public distrust in civil society.

The Serbian government does provide some financial support to NGOs, but a large share of that funding goes to Government NGOs (GONGOs) (Stevkovski, Teofilović, and Petrović 2021). Accordingly, most NGOs in Serbia rely on international aid for most or all their funding. In addition to support from USAID and the EU, Serbian NGOs receive funding from various embassies and international private foundations (Mikuš 2018).

I gathered data for this article through ethnographic research in Serbia conducted from January 1, 2023, to August 5, 2023, and from May 15, 2024, to August 5, 2024. I draw on data from 43 interviews with civil society actors, including leaders and staff of 10 organizations working in fields related to economic development, four organizations working in the field of democracy promotion, three Serbian philanthropic foundations, and four international donor agencies. Because I am not advanced enough in my Serbian language study to conduct interviews in Serbian, I conducted them in English.[3] I also observed civil society organizations' activities and reviewed primary sources.

Ethnography helped me unpack the nuanced effects of the professionalization of Serbian NGOs. It also opened my eyes to the humanity of NGO staff and the creative ways professional NGOs contribute to local communities and everyday Serbians.

I identified the population of organizations in this study through snowball sampling, a method that opened doors and introduced me to the social networks within Serbian civil society. I took several steps to ensure the validity of my interview data, including embedding myself in networks of civil society actors, triangulating interviews with participant observation and consultations with Serbian scholars, and testing my findings with Serbian scholars, and foreign aid practitioners. To protect organizations from government and donor scrutiny, I guaranteed interviewees anonymity.

Interviews were semi-structured and took place in one- to two-hour meetings. Because I had not studied civil society in Serbia before 2023, early interviews asked general information about Serbian NGOs and civil society. Themes of foreign aid localization, NGO professionalization, and the proliferation of grassroots organizations quickly emerged. These themes dominated subsequent interviews and informed this article.

I also observed and participated in organizations' activities, including political awareness campaigns, community conversations, elections monitoring, festivals, press conferences, and civil society convening and conferences.

I coded interviews and field notes thematically and analyzed the data abductively, moving back and forth between data and the literature to develop a dialogue between evidence and theory.

3 | Professionalizing NGOs: Foreign Aid Bureaucracies

Serbia's most prominent civil society organizations are professional, Belgrade-based NGOs. These organizations' professionalism is manifested in organizations' physical spaces, their staff structures and composition, and the intellectual nature of their work.

Professional NGOs are housed in office buildings in the center of Belgrade. Office spaces contain front lobbies, individual staff offices, conference rooms, and kitchenettes. Furniture is modern and IT hardware and systems, along with audio-visual equipment, are up to date.

NGOs' staffing structures are also professional. Organizations are governed by a board of directors and led by an executive director and, often, a deputy director. Staff groups are arranged by functions that include project management; monitoring and evaluation; finance, accounting, and human resources; and marketing and communications. Many NGOs employ college students as interns.

NGOs are intellectually charged. Highly educated staff graduated from prestigious universities and programs. They speak English and rattle off international development and democracy jargon. In meetings, NGO staff analyze polling data, strategize mission-based programs, and develop metrics to evaluate program impact. They manage complex budgets and file audits. And they consume and contribute to local independent and international media outlets.

NGO professionalization is thus very real in Serbia. Because of the nature of foreign aid, it is also necessary for organizations to survive. “NGOs' number one accountability is to donors,” one NGO staff member said bluntly, “because they are the key to [financial] survival” (July 27, 2024).

To win the international community's grants and contracts that they need to operate, NGOs must be professional. Instead of providing general operating support, foreign funding is typically structured in short-term projects. This forces NGO staff to busy themselves in the work of project administration. “It's a crazy situation,” the director of one NGO said. “Civil society doesn't have money for space and salaries, but donors expect a high level of administration and reports and projects. But they won't pay for operating costs. We spend 40 to 50 percent of our hours on administration, not working with communities. Donors will

pay for hotels, for trainings, for anything but salaries and administration. We drive slalom through the gates set by donors" (July 10, 2024).

This reliance on project-based funding contributes to NGOs' professionalism. To compete for projects, organizations submit detailed applications that lay out project goals, a theory of change, a budget, and an evaluation plan. Applications must be written in English and that they must use the specialized language of development and democracy. Such insider knowledge often fails to resonate among everyday people. The executive director of one democracy promotion NGO mused, "People in the West see democracy as a business. In Serbia, we don't have democracy but, in the end, democracy is an imagination" (March 7, 2023). To successfully compete for projects, though, the NGO must frame democracy through an institutional lens: through references to elections, legislatures, the judiciary, EU accession, etc.

During a project, an organization must keep track of project-related expenses and progress toward goals. At the project's conclusion, an organization must submit a final report that evaluates project impact. NGO staff stressed that project administration requires significant staff time and managerial expertise that grassroots organizations simply do not have. "There is so much bureaucracy, administration, and reporting when dealing with donors," a staff member of one NGO said. "Real activists just can't do that. You can't expect local civil society organizations with two staff members to do this reporting. When working with donors, all energy winds up focused on reporting and not on activism. You can't expect local civil society organizations to prepare professional analyses and reports" (July 23, 2024).

The NGOs that *can* prepare these professional analyses and reports dedicate staff departments to project administration. The executive director of one of Serbia's most prominent and well-resourced NGOs said with exasperation that even for her organization the administration imposed by donors is difficult to manage. "Look at our finance department and talk to the staff," she urged me. "See how hard and costly it is to manage 20 projects. It is mission impossible" (March 7, 2023). Furthermore, because funds are issued only when a project begins, NGO staff must plan the organization's spending on a short-term basis. A member of this NGO's finance team explained, "Cash flow is a challenge. Donors don't give money in advance, so we budget on a monthly basis. This requires coordination between the finance and program departments. We must know activities to calculate costs or tell the program team, 'you don't have money for that'" (March 23, 2023).

At the end of a project, the NGO must submit a detailed report to the donor. The finance team member quoted above recounted an example of the bureaucracy this reporting imposed. "In 2020 we had 28 projects and 45 reports to donors. Every four to 5 days a report left the office. Some projects required monthly reports, some quarterly, some every 6 months, some annual. Reports must justify all spends spent; we must submit bank statements, travel receipts, payroll, and time sheets. We must document evidence that a project was carried out, for example through sign in lists for trainings, boarding passes to show that we flew, signatures of training participants" (March 23, 2023).

NGOs also undergo regular audits. Approved auditors differ by donor, so at any given time organizations are undergoing several audits by several different auditors who have unique audit requirements. "There are external audits for all projects that we must submit," the finance team member said as we continued our conversation. "It can be challenging to find an auditor who is qualified and who the donor approves. And many auditors don't know us well. It would be good to have one or two long term auditors, but donors require us to change auditors regularly. Now we have three to five auditors at a time." She stressed that audits are not useless. The organization does learn from them. "But because the audit standards and principles are different for different donors, it takes staff time and expertise required to undergo them" (March 23, 2023).

If so much NGO work centers on administration rather than programming, why do staff join these organizations in the first place? If they are mission-driven, it would follow that they would instead work for grassroots organizations that focus more on programming than on managing projects. Perhaps, as critical civil society literature suggests, staff join professional NGOs for career advancement, skill development, and competitive salaries. In fact, NGO staff are highly mission driven. They enter in the sector not to advance their own professional interests but rather to pursue a social mission. And they remain in the sector despite the many challenges that professional NGO work entails.

4 | Humanizing NGOs: Staff Passion and Commitment to Mission

"I like to help people." A staff member of an NGO that both operates programs and provides grants to grassroots organizations responded immediately with this simple, straightforward reply when I asked why he entered the civil society sector (July 24, 2024). He explained that he studied information technology (IT) in university and imagined that he would work for a mobile company or a bank after graduation. Instead, he wound up joining the NGO. "I didn't plan to stay in civil society," he said, "but I fell in love with the work. I like that it is dynamic, if exhausting. We achieve so many results in a year." He stressed that he could have made more money in the IT sector but "would have been less satisfied."

When I asked staff members of professional NGOs why they work for these organizations, none mentioned prestige, career advancement, skill development, or salary—the types of incentives that often lure highly educated people to managerial organizations. Instead, they stressed their commitment to social change in Serbia and their conviction that their organization contribute significantly to such change. They expressed emotional ties to the work and to the everyday Serbians their work serves. Through these conversations, professional NGO staff revealed their deep humanity, leading me to realize that NGOs are not soulless bureaucracies but rather organizations staffed by people so committed to a mission that they pursue

that mission even when the work is physically, mentally, and emotionally taxing.

A staff member at a different NGO also discovered civil society work by accident and has remained at the same NGO over the 16 years of her career to date. "I was a student [in the faculty of political science], but I was politically inactive. I hate politics and didn't want to be part of a party or ministry," she explained (July 23, 2024). A friend introduced this woman to the NGO, and she started volunteering there. "I volunteered to collect signatures regarding the election law. We wanted to require a minimum percent of voices from minorities in elections. I spent a few days in a small office stamping signatures. I guess I did a good job." Before she graduated, this woman had a job lined up at the NGO. She now oversees the organization's work on civil society development, working with grassroots organizations across Serbia.

The work isn't easy. When we met in July of 2024—a month when it seems nearly all of Serbia is on holiday—I asked this woman how she was doing. "I am exhausted," she sighed, reaching for her cup of Turkish coffee. "The work is chaotic. I have been working overtime helping grassroots organizations edit progress reports for our regranting program. When I received the reports, I planned to send a few comments to each one. Instead, I am correcting nearly every line." She explained that this wasn't officially her responsibility but, "Of course I do it because I care about these groups and their ability to affect change." She went on, "I really believe that civil society organizations can make change. We do our work for them." But, she reiterated, "This is not a nine to five job." I asked if the work paid well. She laughed. "I don't think NGO staff could raise a family on their own salary. You need a spouse and parents to help. The salaries aren't sustainable."

NGO staff stay in their jobs not only despite the low salaries. They also remain despite feeling harassed by both the government and donors. Government harassment occurs primarily through the state-controlled media. "The government attacks NGOs through all national media," the director of one grassroots organization said (July 16, 2024). Therefore, she said, "Society, public opinion, is confused. People can't learn about the civil society sector." An intern at a democracy promotion NGO that is a regular target of government attacks concurred. "If you tell people you work for [this organization] they say, 'Oh you are money laundering'" (April 27, 2023). Government propaganda tainted NGO staff members' reputations not only among the public but also among family members. Another intern at the democracy promotion NGO said that when she told her grandmother that she works for an NGO in Belgrade, her grandmother asked, "How can you work against your country?" (April 27, 2023).

The government's charge that NGOs are foreign agents is particularly dangerous during elections. The director of the democracy promotion NGO explained that one of its election observers was physically attacked while monitoring the December 17, 2023, elections. Then, that director and her deputy were personally attacked in a news article that painted them as wealthy elites who drove fancy cars and lived in large flats in posh neighborhoods.[4]

NGO staff members' frustration with government harassment should not be surprising. Around the world, governments are defaming NGOs as foreign agents and imprisoning staff members on trumped up charges of spying and operating illegal organizations (Brechenmacher 2017; Dupuy, Ron, and Prakash 2016; Herrold 2020). What took me aback was that my interlocutors felt more betrayed by donors than by the Serbian government.

Many NGO staff members are frustrated that international donors bankrolled the creation and growth of their organizations but are now decreasing financial support. "Donors built us and now pulled out," said the project manager of a democracy promotion NGOs. "Donors think that democracy is on track in Serbia, so they are shifting focus elsewhere" (July 11, 2024). Staff of other NGOs agreed, expressing heightened concern in 2024 as the international community focused on the wars in Ukraine and Gaza. Some had begun considering contingency career plans in case the funding that remained in Serbia was insufficient to sustain their organizations.

Shifting donor priorities is a reality of international aid. More alarming is that Serbian NGO staff believed that donors used their organizations in ways that benefitted the donor and put the Serbian staff members at risk.[5] In 2024, the government convened a working group to address charges of election fraud in the December 2023 election. Civil society had a seat at the table. The international community advocated that the democracy promotion NGO so slandered by the government be represented. The NGO's staff did not expect to participate. "A minister said that the government would accept [our NGO] at the table over her dead body," the NGO's director told me. "But we wound up there and the international community saw this as a small diplomatic success" (June 18, 2024). The leaders and staff of the NGOs debated whether the organization should participate in the working group. They knew that they would be sending only the deputy director and that he would "be there alone against the ruling majority." But, the director said, "the international community and the political opposition expected us to be there." So, the NGO sent its deputy director to represent civil society in front of the government.

"We played useful fools," the NGO director reflected when we met in June 2024. "We gave the government and the international community a stamp of legitimacy" (June 18, 2024). Government representatives stopped attending the meetings, giving an excuse to the international community that the party's representatives no longer had the capacity to participate. "The ambassadors bought it," the NGO director said. From her perspective, the international community cared more that the talks took place than that a resolution was produced. In other words, if the government appeared to be addressing election fraud, it didn't matter if such fraud was eliminated. The NGO wound up the "useful fool" for participating in what NGO staff realized were sham talks. "The international community wants good relations with the ruling party, but why abuse NGOs' dignity?"

The NGO's staff felt "battered on all sides"—by the ruling government and by the international community that was presumably civil society's ally (June 18, 2024). "We are accused by

the government of being foreign agents and it works [to tarnish reputation]. And the international community is helping the ruling party. It is pushing real democrats away at a time when we need them to pull close to us," the director said. Her deputy, also in the room, sighed. "The only motivation comes from the people who say that without your organization we wouldn't have hope," he said. "But even with that it's hard" (June 18, 2024).

5 | Localizing NGOs: Financial and Technical Support to Grassroots Organizations

NGO staff members' commitment to their organizations' social missions and to supporting local communities is manifested tangibly through NGOs' sub-granting programs and through capacity building that Belgrade-based NGO staff provide to small, community-based organizations throughout Serbia.

In sub-granting schemes, professional NGOs channel small grants to grassroots groups to carry out projects and grow their operations. In such programs, the professional NGO receives a large grant from an international donor, divides that large grant into smaller sub-grants, and re-grants those to grassroots organizations. The grassroots groups that apply for and receive sub-grants tend to be relatively young, often less than 10 years old. Most were established by people in their late twenties, thirties, and forties who are highly educated and could have built careers in Belgrade or abroad but instead wanted to return to their hometowns and work for change there. Sub-grantees typically employ only one or at most two or three staff members and rely on large volunteer teams to carry out their work. They often work in the realm of advocacy, mobilizing local community members around issues such as youth development, environmental protection, local infrastructure restoration, and community beautification. Some have small, modest offices while others have no physical headquarters.

All these grassroots groups are embedded in their local communities. When I visited them, I sensed the emotional connections their staff and volunteers feel to the community's physical space and to the people who inhabit that space. For example, when I visited a grassroots organization focused on environmental protection in the town of Valjevo, its staff invited me to swim in the Gradac River, indicating that the river is a cornerstone of the local community. As we walked along the river, the organization's staff and volunteers hugged the children swimming and fishing in the river. They chatted with patrons at a cafe located on the river. And they invited me to return for a festival they would host the following month that brings together community members to celebrate the river. I witnessed similar emotional and relational bonds between grassroots groups' staff and volunteers and their communities at all the small groups I visited.

These grassroots groups are mushrooming across Serbia. "There are more and more small, local groups taking the initiative to advance change," a staff member at a Belgrade-based NGO said (March 23, 2023). "Large legacy institutions are failing. People see injustice that is long-term and are fed up that there is no change." This NGO relies exclusively on foreign aid for its budget and its core activity is democracy promotion at the national level. But it also maintains an extensive sub-granting program, channeling funds and providing technical support to small groups across Serbia. "We try to empower [small, local groups]. For example, [we support] an organization trying to prevent a green area in a neighborhood from being taken over by investors. We try to make [the groups] visible, we promote them on social networks, we provide legal support" (March 23, 2023).

A staff member at another Belgrade-based NGO that receives international funding and offers sub-grants to grassroots organizations described her organization as an "intermediary between international donors and local organizations" (April 4, 2023). "We help local organizations get international funds." But NGO staff consistently maintained that the real benefit to local organizations is not the money provided by the sub-grants —although that is a budgetary lifeline for small groups—but rather the mentoring and technical support NGOs offer to their sub-grantees. Unlike international donors that are far removed from rural towns, the staff of Belgrade-based NGOs regularly visit and spend time in the communities in which grassroots groups are embedded. "The key is to listen to people. They are the experts on the ground and know the local needs and the local resources [that can be used to meet those needs]," said the NGO staff member quoted just above (April 4, 2023). Toward that end, this staff member and her NGO teammates mentor grassroots groups on both programs and administration. "We focus on capacity building to civil society organizations for community mobilization and for their ability to absorb the money we grant them. We don't want these groups to professionalize, but they need to have a basic level of organizational capacity to be sustainable," she explained.

Often, professional NGO staff are not compensated for the mentoring and capacity building assistance they provide to grassroots groups. Recall the NGO staff member who I quoted earlier as being "exhausted" from working overtime to help sub-grantees prepare reports. Such unpaid overtime work was typical among NGO staff. "Often, grassroots groups have a good idea but a poor proposal or conceptual model. So, we work with them on an in-kind [(unpaid)] basis to articulate a strategic direction and convey that in a proposal" (June 24, 2024). "We also provide messaging training. We teach small groups to draft messages that will mobilize their communities. Our own NGO learned how to message successfully through trial and error so now we teach the lessons we learned."

For their part, the staff and volunteers of grassroots groups appreciate the support that the Belgrade-based NGOs provide. They know that without the large NGOs, their small groups would have no access to international aid. The director of one grassroots organization said with frustration, "Big donors have more confidence that big NGOs will do the reporting that they require" (July 3, 2023). The director stressed that his organization could do the type of reporting required by donors like the EU, but "it is so demanding. [The NGOs that give us sub-grants] have a smoother process. We report milestones and can easily amend those milestones along the way. We can make our reports in the form of narratives and share the reactions of the

people we serve. We report on what actually *happened* as a result of the activity, not how many people showed up to a focus group, for example. We highlight the main details, and this type of reporting gives us more time for the activities of our work instead of [spending that time on] the bureaucracy of reporting."

The director of this grassroots group was also grateful to one of its NGO donors for advocating for his organization to the international donor. Even sub-grantees must put the international aid providers' logos on all materials related to projects funded by the aid that went through the larger NGO. But this group knew that by adding a USAID or EU logo to its social media posts it would lose credibility among the local population—the very people it served. The Belgrade-based NGO that provided the sub-grant persuaded the international donor to turn a blind eye and not require its logo on the grassroots organization's social media posts, thus ensuring that the group maintained local legitimacy.

Thus, not only are the staff members of professional NGOs passionate about, and committed to, advancing their organizations' social missions. They also tangibly support the grassroots organizations that are at the front lines of community-led social change work through formal sub-granting programs and informal mentoring and technical support. The Belgrade-based NGOs may not be immersed in local communities or nurturing civic engagement in local people. They are, though, supporting the grassroots groups that do so.

6 | Patronizing the Provodadžija

"For this type of work," the director of the democracy promotion NGO who was involved in negotiations with the Serbian government over election irregularities, "you must be big. The government hopes you won't deliver. You need expertise, manpower, and allies to go up against the government" (June 18, 2024).

Critical scholarship on civil society is skeptical of NGO professionalism. It argues that by imposing Western agendas and languages, as well as complicated administrative processes, on grantees, foreign aid jeopardizes NGOs' ability to reach and mobilize everyday people around local priorities. To some extent, critical scholars are correct. But as I have argued in this article, the professional NGOs in Serbia that receive the bulk of foreign aid directed to local civil society are not just bureaucratic machines that gluttonously feed off their foreign patrons. Instead, these organizations are staffed by activists who maintain emotional stakes in advancing social change at both national and local levels. They are so committed to this work that they risk their physical security to carry it out. And in doing so, they empower the grassroots groups that are mobilizing everyday people and responding to pressing community needs.

Moreover, as the opening quote of this conclusion suggests, NGO professionalism has benefits. First, size, expertise, and money give professional NGOs leverage with national power brokers. While it is often in grassroots groups' interest to fly under the government's radar, civil society does need to be represented in rooms where policy decisions are made. Professional NGOs are these representatives. Second, professional NGOs have the capacity to absorb foreign aid. Because they can hire whole teams devoted to administration, professional NGOs can manage the bureaucracy, administration, and reporting mandated by international donors. Without that absorptive capacity, interlocutors fear that civil society in Serbia would collapse since there are few other sources of funds for civic groups. Third, NGOs' competitive salaries and professional career ladders attract young people to social change work who otherwise might have left Serbia or pursued lucrative careers in industry. Serbian NGOs provide opportunities for young people to dedicate their professional skills to advancing social change at home—and pay them a living wage to do so.

Perhaps, then, rather than criticizing professional NGOs for what they are not, scholarship should focus more attention on studying—with the aim of improving—what NGOs are. Professional NGOs are critical links between the international community and the grassroots organizations and everyday people the international community purports to serve (Balboa 2014, 2018). With their ability to manage aid bureaucracies on the one hand and support grassroots groups on the other hand, professional NGOs are the organizations that are best positioned to be effective partners in international donors' aid localization strategies. Professional NGOs might therefore be referred to not as bandits but as "provodadžija,"—the Serbian word for a professional matchmaker of husbands and wives—who hitch members of the international community to those of local, everyday people.

If we translated "provodadžija" to other languages, would the term remain an accurate description for professional NGOs? In other words, does the Serbian case travel? I think that it does, for three key reasons. First, young people around the world are disenchanted with legacy institutions. They are increasingly experimenting with alternative vehicles through which to create public value—including the types of grassroots organizations featured in this article. This opens an important line of research around how professional NGOs can best support grassroots groups operating at hyper-local levels. This article suggested that professional NGOs can offer sub-grants and technical support to grassroots organizations and advocate on their behalf to foreign aid providers and national policy makers. Are there other best practices? Second, governments that feel threatened by NGOs are stepping up harassment campaigns. Charges that NGOs are "foreign agents" are especially conspicuous but informal harassment is also widespread (Brechenmacher 2017; Dupuy, Ron, and Prakash 2016; Herrold 2020). What can we learn from the Serbian case about how NGO staff withstand government repression and maintain favorable reputations with citizens? Third, since USAID launched its Local Works program in Serbia a decade ago, other Western aid agencies have ramped up their own localization strategies. What can scholars and aid providers learn from USAID's experience in Serbia?

On the one hand, this article might suggest that donors should channel more funds to professional NGOs under the condition that those NGOs use the aid in part to support grassroots groups. But a note of caution is warranted: Professional NGO

staff are burnt out. I first met the deputy director of the democracy promotion NGO profiled in the introduction to this article in early 2023. At the time, he was filled with energy, resolve, and optimism about the future of civil society in Serbia. When we met again in the summer of 2024, he was weary and demoralized after being attacked by the government and abused as a "useful fool" by the international community. He was frustrated that his team's perseverance wasn't paying off. "Our risk appetite is changing. We are asking ourselves why? For whom? For too long we have seen no results. We don't do this work as a project, it's a way of life. We are working for real change for real people, and we don't see that," he said sadly (June 18, 2024). "Personally, and as an organization, we are demoralized. We don't see the purpose. I am at my lowest personal level. We hear from the international community to continue the dialogues with the government. Why? Just to be there?" he asked. With cynicism in his voice, he added, "I'm not paid for that."

Thus, as it doubles down on an aid localization agenda, the international community must remember that although professional NGOs can speak donors' language, manage donors' bureaucracies, and feed donors the results that their own governments expect to see, these NGOs are staffed by very real humans whose humanity—and the humanity of the everyday people they serve—is what will ultimately drive and sustain the social change donors hope to support. How might donors do this? Drawing upon the experiences of Serbian NGO staff, I urge scholars to consider and test the following three ideas:

First, tailor capacity building programs to grant recipients' unique needs. "The trainings donors impose often don't fit organizations' expertise," said the director of a grassroots organizations that coached networks of youth groups throughout the country conducting advocacy campaigns. The training that his organization didn't find useful? Primers on how to conduct advocacy campaigns. Other NGO staff agreed and suggested that instead of funding useless trainings, donors could help NGOs bolster their administrative capacities or enhance core programs.[6] The key would be for donors to commit to *funding* NGOs' capacity strengthening efforts and only provide guidance and technical support for such strengthening when it advanced, and did not detract from, organizations' unique needs.

Second, try to be flexible in how project grants are spent. Several organizations incurred unexpected costs as they responded to the COVID-19 pandemic. Others rapidly expanded programs in 2023 and 2024 as they seized a window of opportunity to support widespread anti-government protests. To pay for this, NGO staff had to creatively shift funds earmarked for overhead. In some cases, staff spent personal funds to pay for unanticipated, mission-aligned work.

Third, consider how to expand donors' risk appetites to account for the programmatic and reputational risks of supporting more locally owned programs. Foreign aid is, of course, a foreign policy tool. International donor agencies cannot be expected to go up against "friendly" dictators when ambassadors shoulders up to them. But can donors find creative ways to support NGOs that fight government repression and support citizen freedom in ally countries? At the very least, donors should take all steps necessary to avoid making NGOs feel like "useful fools."

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Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

Policy Impact Statement

NGOs are critical links between the international community and the grassroots communities the international community purports to serve. This article recommends how foreign aid localization strategies can most effectively support NGOs in target countries.

Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

Endnotes

[1] I was late to this observation. Anthropologists such as Jessica Greenberg and Roderick Stirrat previously uncovered the complex roles and motivations of NGOs and their staff (Greenberg 2014; Stirrat 2008).

[2] Scholars have argued that NGOs' turn to development depoliticized their work (Brown 2003; Carothers and DeGramont 2013; Dana 2015; Herrold 2022; Rahman 2006). I join others in arguing that in fact service delivery is an inherently political act (Brass 2012; Herrold 2020; Herrold and AbouAssi 2023; Srinivas 2022). Regardless, the professional NGOs that deliver services and promote democracy are typically not engaging citizens in the work of the organization and, in turn, cultivating habits of civic engagement through direct practice.

[3] While all my interviewees were fluent in English, and in fact conducted much of their NGO work in the English language, I acknowledge that some meanings and nuances always get lost in translation. I am taking language lessons to mitigate this weakness in future research.

[4] https://crd.org/2021/03/18/members-of-serbias-ruling-party-to-stop-threatening-csos/.

[5] Similarly, scholars Rana Khoury and Emily Scott found that foreign donors relied on local Syrian organizations to provide access for humanitarian interventions in ways that put local actors at risk (Khoury and Scott 2024).

[6] USAID has begun to do this. USAID's Local Empowerment to Advance Development (LEAD) program in Mozambique, for example, provides funding a technical support for Mozambican civil society organizations

to strengthen their organizational capacity "*as an outcome in itself*." The project, according to USAID, is designed to tailor capacity development to each organization's unique needs and position them to better advance their development goals. See: https://www.usaid.gov/en/blog/strengthening-capacity-in-real-time?utm_medium=email&utm_source=govdelivery.

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