

How do civil society organizations communicate in an authoritarian setting? A narrative analysis of the Russian waste management debate

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Funding information

Academic Fund Program at the National Research University Higher School of Economics (HSE University) in 2020-2021, Russian Academic Excellence Project 5-100, Grant/Award Number: 20-04-003

Abstract

Civil society organizations (CSOs) aim to influence public policy. One way of influencing policy is through communication. In authoritarian contexts, CSOs face restrictions that make criticism of governmental actors less likely. However, to achieve change, CSOs need to highlight public problems that are often created by the inaction of governmental actors. This research examines the communicative strategies of CSOs involved in waste management in Russia. By drawing on the Narrative Policy Framework, it examines narratives used by CSOs on social media. Interviews with these CSO provide explanations of why CSOs select specific narrative strategies. We argue that the narrative strategies of CSOs are determined by their objectives of communication related to the activities they are involved in but are also influenced by their working relationship with the government. Results show that CSOs that are involved in educational activities and service provision mostly pursue an angel-shift-strategy, highlighting policy solutions. Only larger CSOs communicate critically

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and continue to attempt working with governmental actors to influence policy through awareness-raising and policy advocacy.

KEYWORDS

civil society organization (CSO), communicative strategy, narrative policy framework, Russia, waste management

INTRODUCTION

Civil society organizations (CSOs)¹ frequently collaborate with the state to formulate and implement public policy (Mintrom & Vergari, 1998; Rhodes, 1996; Salamon, 1995). The forms of interaction between the state and CSOs depend on the political regime (Clarke, 1998; Salamon & Toepler, 2015). Democratic institutions give CSOs-institutionalized opportunities to influence public policy, while authoritarian governments tend to restrict the work of CSOs. However, authoritarian governments also involve CSOs in policy making (Bindman et al., 2019; Blatt & Schlauffer, 2021; Bogdanova & Tkach, 2016; Davies et al., 2016; He & Thogersen, 2010; Mertha, 2009); CSOs in authoritarian states operate within this restricted system and collaborate according to the rules dictated by state actors (Mertha, 2009).

In Russia, the state plays an ambiguous role toward CSOs. CSOs experience increasing constraints and controls from the state, even though the government has repeatedly stated its interest to cooperate with CSOs by opening opportunities and funding possibilities for CSOs that collaborate with the state (Bindman et al., 2019; Fröhlich, 2012). This raises the question of what strategies CSOs chose when communicating about public policy in the restrictive Russian context. It may be expected that CSOs avoid publicly criticizing government policy. Yet, CSOs that aim to improve public policy also need to draw attention to problems or highlight the lack of effectiveness of governmental policies.

This study explores the communicative strategies of Russian CSOs. It asks the following research questions: (1) How do CSOs communicate about policy in an authoritarian context?, (2) Do different CSOs use different communicative strategies?, and (3) Why do CSOs choose a specific communicative strategy?

To answer these questions, this research examines the narratives employed by CSOs involved in Russian waste management policy. Empirically, we examine the narratives used by environmental CSOs on their public social media accounts. To explain why CSOs chose a certain narrative strategy, we draw on semi-structured interviews with CSO representatives. Theoretically, we draw on the Narrative Policy Framework (NPF) (Jones et al., 2014; Shanahan et al., 2017). The NPF provides a useful framework to empirically study how policy actors strategically use narratives to achieve their objectives, for example, to mobilize supporters, to advocate for their policy preferences, or to draw attention to problems. The NPF literature examines a variety of narrative strategies. One narrative strategy frequently studied by NPF scholars is the devil-angel shift (Chang & Koebele, 2020; Gottlieb et al., 2018; Merry, 2019; Sabatier et al., 1987; Shanahan et al., 2013). Policy actors who employ a devil shift depict their opponents as powerful villains, while de-emphasizing the role of heroes. Policy actors using an angel-shift strategy, on the other hand, present themselves as heroes, while not accentuating villains.

Recent NPF studies have argued that policy actors who promote reforms tend to employ angel shifts, while actors opposing reforms use devil shifts (Chang & Koebele, 2020; Schlaufer, Gafurova, et al., 2021). Research employing the NPF in the Russian context has shown that governmental actors consistently use angel shifts to promote governmental policy reforms. Oppositional actors, on the other hand, employ a devil-shift strategy to draw attention to problems of government-led policy reforms and to expand political conflict (Schlaufer, Gafurova, et al., 2021; Schlaufer, Khaynatskaya, et al., 2021; Uldanov et al., 2021). Existing research has, however, not examined what narrative strategies CSOs employ when they communicate about policy in an authoritarian environment. CSOs are often against government-driven reforms but also promote policy solutions that are different from those implemented by the government and at times cooperate with the government to contribute to policy formulation (Schlaufer, Khaynatskaya, et al., 2021). We argue that the narrative strategies of Russian CSOs are determined by their activities and related objectives of communication but also by their working relationship with the government. Our results show that, overall, environmental CSOs communicate on social media to promote the environmental-friendly behavior of citizens. To do so, they more often use angel shifts and propose concrete solutions, while avoiding criticizing and highlighting problems. Nonetheless, some, mostly larger organizations that are involved in policy advocacy use a devil shift and openly criticize governmental policy in cases where they want to call attention to an urgent problem. Smaller organizations often consciously avoid criticizing the government.

The article advances public policy research in two ways. First, it illustrates how and why CSOs attempt to influence public policy in an authoritarian setting through communication. Second, it furthers the debate on what drives policy actors' narrative strategies by suggesting different objectives as a predictor for narrative strategies.

The article is organized as follows. First, the article explains the institutional contexts of CSOs in Russia and presents a literature review on the communicative strategies of CSOs. Second, the NPF as a theoretical framework is presented. Third, the case of waste management is introduced. Fourth, we explain our methodological approach, before presenting the research findings. The discussion and conclusion section summarizes results and highlights the contributions of this research to the literature.

CSOs in the Russian context

CSOs often cooperate with governments to develop and implement policy. The forms of interaction between governments and civil society organizations depend on the political regime (Clarke, 1998; Salamon & Toepler, 2015). The Russian institutional context provides a typical case of a dual approach of authoritarian governments toward CSOs (Fröhlich & Skokova, 2020; Tulaeva et al., 2017). On the one hand, the Russian government has repeatedly expressed its interest in cooperating with CSOs and opened funding opportunities for NGOs (Bokeriya, 2013; Bindman et al., 2019). Government-supported CSOs are typically active in welfare policies and governmental financial support is mainly provided to socially oriented NGOs (Yagodka, 2015). These organizations may be regarded as regime-loyal, as they often support governmental discourse (Toepler et al., 2020). However, even those organizations that are considered as loyal to the Russian regime are forced to adapt to the institutional context. Yarskaya-Smirnova and Bodrova (2021) argue that many CSOs must legitimize themselves, maneuver, and adapt to changing conditions. As a result, this contributes to the cultivation of "puppet CSOs" that help to legitimize the political regime (Tulaeva et al., 2017).

On the other hand, Russian CSOs are increasingly facing restrictions that significantly limit their activities. Governmental actions to tighten control over CSOs started with the 2006 NGO law (Federal Law 18, 2006)² and then continued with the Foreign Agents Law (Federal Law 121, 2012)³ and the Undesirable Organizations Act (Federal Law 129, 2015).⁴ The combination of restrictive governmental measures against CSOs and support of other CSOs has led to a division of CSOs into “good” and “bad,” that is system and non-system CSOs (Yanickij, 2007). Consequently, the authorities exclusively support system CSOs (Yanickij, 2007, p. 3).

CSOs are forced to adapt to the restrictive institutional environment (Kefner & Morgun, 2020; Tulaeva et al., 2017). According to Kefner and Morgun (2020), the most common adaptation methods are to limit activities, to refuse foreign funding, or to choose informal practices to promote their agenda. CSOs implement a variety of semi-formal or informal tools to maintain functioning by “imitating the fulfillment of state requirements or finding legal and semi-legal ways to circumvent them” (Tulaeva et al., 2017, p. 37). Thus, Russian CSOs are forced to hide and somehow suppress their public positioning to avoid being a “foreign agent” and/or an “undesirable organization.” Moreover, CSOs limit institutional interaction platforms and prioritize personal connections and informal agreements instead of official cooperation with governmental actors.

The field of waste management policy is no exception. The existing institutional barriers for CSOs, such as the lack of institutional support, insufficient media coverage, or financial problems due to insufficient grant possibilities, are also relevant for environmental organizations. Secondly, some environmental CSOs have been declared foreign agents and are restricted in their activities (Ivanov, 2020; Levkina, 2016).

Communicative strategies of CSOs

CSOs use different strategies to communicate with the government, businesses, other civil society organizations, and the public. CSOs depend on their ability to raise public awareness about their issues of concern and to strategically communicate to achieve change (Duong, 2017; Radu & Seler, 2015). CSOs communicative strategies may be distinguished along different criteria (Figenschou, 2020; Gurung, 2014). First, communicative strategies can be divided into insider and outsider strategies (Figenschou, 2020). The first may include lobbying through direct contact with decision makers, while the second aims to mobilize the public through the media and social networks. CSOs that lack resources tend to use outsider strategies to gain visibility, voice, and authority as an indirect means of political influence (Figenschou, 2020). Second, communicative strategies can be distinguished by their purpose (Gurung, 2014). The key strategies aim at constituency building (i.e., building a support base), collaboration (i.e., collaborate with like-minded actors), persuasion (i.e., convincing policymakers and stakeholders about specific policy choices), education (i.e., raising awareness on certain issues), and confrontation (i.e., pressuring policymakers). Gurung (2014) emphasizes that CSOs usually combine these strategies.

Common means of communication include opinion pieces, front-page articles in newspapers, radio messages, blogging, and the use of social media platforms (Bosch et al., 2019). Until the emergence of the internet, CSOs' efforts were focused on accessing mainstream media (Carroll & Ratner, 1999; Vozab, 2012), but attention has recently turned to websites and social media (Janssen & Chaudhri, 2018). Websites are seen as a one-way information platform (Ferguson, 2018; Sommerfeldt, 2013), while social media communication “builds a sense of unity and belonging in the nonprofit sector, sets the stage for personal familiarity and then not only online but also offline interactions” (Isaeva & Sokolov, 2021, p. 43).

In authoritarian contexts, CSOs face difficulties to publicly communicate due to restrictions and control of the mass media and the internet. Communication on social media and digital activism has become increasingly important, as social media has provided one way for CSOs to bypass the mainstream media and the limited opportunities to mobilize supporters offline (Bosch et al., 2019). However, restrictions to freedom of expression in authoritarian settings also increasingly apply to social media. Such restrictions include removing content that encourages collective action, as well as tracking and arresting digital activists (Bulovsky, 2019; King et al., 2013; Moore-Gilbert & Abdul-Nabi, 2021; Pearce & Kendzior, 2012).

Theoretical framework: The narrative policy framework

Narratives play an important role in human cognition and communication (Shanahan et al., 2017). The importance of narratives has long been recognized in psychology, neuroscience, communication, and marketing studies (e.g., Armstrong, 2020; Green & Brock, 2005; van den Hende et al., 2012). Increasingly, narratives have become a key focus of public policy research (Jones & McBeth, 2010; Jones et al., 2014; Roe, 1994; Shanahan et al., 2017; Stone, 2012).

The NPF offers a systematic framework to study the role of narratives in policy processes (Shanahan et al., 2017). The NPF examines the use of narratives through a structuralist approach: the NPF maintains that narratives contain the same structural elements across different contexts. Important narrative elements are the setting of a narrative, characters—heroes, villains, and victims—plots, and the moral of the story. The NPF studies the role of narratives at three different levels of analysis. The micro-level examines how narratives can influence individuals; the meso-level looks at how policy actors strategically use narratives to achieve their objectives; the macro-level examines overarching narratives that are anchored in cultural and institutional contexts. This study focuses on the meso level, which examines how policy actors, including civil society actors, strategically communicate to influence the policy process at various stages (Crow & Berggren, 2014; Lybecker et al., 2016; McBeth et al., 2016).

The NPF centered around three narrative strategies: the scope of conflict (the use of narratives to strategically expand or contain the political conflict), the devil-angel shift (the strategic use of heroes and villains), and causal mechanisms (the strategic allocation of blame for a problem). The most frequently examined narrative strategy is the devil-angel shift (Chang & Koebele, 2020; Gottlieb et al., 2018; Heikkilä et al., 2014; Merry, 2019; Schlaufer, 2018; Shanahan et al., 2013; Stephan, 2020). The devil shift originated in the Advocacy Coalition Framework literature (Sabatier et al., 1987). The devil shift designates the political strategy of presenting opponents as evil and powerful. The NPF has developed a complementary strategy, the angel shift (Shanahan et al., 2013), describing the strategy of presenting characters as heroes. The NPF scholarship examines the devil-angel shift through an empirical analysis of the use of villains and heroes in narratives.

Originally, the NPF literature has posited that winning coalitions use different narrative strategies than losing coalitions (Shanahan et al., 2013, 2017). However, several studies have not confirmed this hypothesis (Heikkilä et al., 2014; Merry, 2016, 2019). Therefore, the recent NPF literature argues that the use of narrative strategies depends on the position of policy actors (Gottlieb et al., 2018), more precisely, on the status-quo or reform-orientation of policy positions (Chang & Koebele, 2020). Accordingly, policy actors who promote policy reforms tend to employ angel shifts, while policy actors seeking to maintain the status quo and oppose reforms use devil

shifts (Chang & Koebele, 2020).⁵ Schlaufer, Gafurova, et al. (2021) provide an explanation of why policy positions may influence narrative strategies by linking them to the objectives of policy actors. The main objective of pro-reform actors is to promote their policy solutions. To do so, they tend to employ angel shifts, and use a positive communicative strategy that focuses on heroes, policy solutions, and highlights the benefits of policies. Actors opposing policy reforms, however, aim to draw attention to problems with their narratives. Such actors tend to use devil shifts and follow a generally negative communicative strategy highlighting villains and victims, and the problems and costs of policies (Schlaufer, Gafurova, et al., 2021).

We build on these findings to develop expectations about why CSOs select a specific narrative strategy in an authoritarian context. Overall, CSOs are expected to be involved in promoting policy reforms and calling attention to problems. Which one prevails is, arguably, related to their main activities: communication aimed at the education of the general public is expected to differ from communication aimed at policy advocacy. We suggest that the communication of CSOs that are mainly involved in implementing projects, delivering services to citizens, and in organizing educational activities tend to focus on the benefits of concrete policies and actions. Such CSOs are expected to pursue a positive narrative strategy. CSOs involved in policy advocacy to convince policymakers and stakeholders about specific policy choices are also expected to center their communication around policy solutions. However, policy advocacy also involves drawing attention to problems. Therefore, those CSOs involved in policy advocacy will use both positive and negative narrative strategies. CSOs that follow a confrontational strategy through political activities such as the organization of protests to pressure policymakers, however, are expected to use devil shifts and highlight problems. In the Russian authoritarian context, however, CSOs involved mostly in pressuring activities are expected to be rare.

The relationship with and access to governmental actors may also influence the strategy chosen by a CSO. It may be argued that organizations that try to collaborate with the government will avoid public criticism of governmental policy and pursue a positive narrative strategy through an angel shift. Others may have a working relationship with the government but still raise criticism to a certain extent. Yet others are expected to avoid contact with governmental actors and to remain apolitical in their communication.

Other factors that are expected to impact CSOs' communication are their size and the resources at their disposal. Larger organizations that operate at the national or international level have more resources at their disposal. They are involved in more activities, and, therefore, a larger variety of different narrative strategies is expected from them. Larger CSOs can afford to be more critical of governmental policy or inaction and raise attention to problems. Smaller CSOs, especially at the local level might not want to lose a working relationship with governmental actors and are more restricted in their choice of strategies.

In summary, we posit the following expectations for the choice of communication strategies in authoritarian settings:

- CSOs that are mainly involved in service provision and educational activities tend to employ a positive narrative strategy with angel shifts and a focus on policy solutions.
- CSOs that are mainly involved in policy advocacy and those that are involved in a variety of activities tend to employ a variety of strategies, that is, they use both angel and devil shifts and highlight problems and solutions in their narratives.
- CSOs that are mainly involved in pressurizing through confrontational political activities tend to employ a negative narrative strategy with a devil shift and a focus on problems.

The empirical part of this article examines the narrative strategies of different CSOs and explores the reasons why an organization chooses a specific communicative strategy. In the following sections, we present the case and the methodological approach used to examine these expectations.

The case: Waste management policy in Russia

One of the most problematic aspects of Russian environmental policy is waste management. After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Russia did not change the Soviet waste disposal system, which mainly relied on landfills to dispose of garbage. In the mid-2010s, this system came close to a collapse due to the growing population's increasing level of consumption and the related garbage production. The volume of municipal solid waste (MSW) has steadily increased due to the growth of disposable goods and packaging (Greenpeace, 2021). MSW management still primarily relies on landfill disposal, and more than 90% of waste is sent to landfills.

In 2014, a new waste management reform was supposed to create a new system for MSW management. The reform started with a new federal law adopted to reduce landfill disposal and increase recycling (Federal Law 458, 2014). The law defines concrete measures aimed at reducing waste disposal, by setting limits on the use of raw materials, reducing the generation of waste, encouraging waste utilization, and promoting the detoxification of landfills. For greater control over MSW, the state prohibited citizens and legal entities from concluding contracts for waste removal with everyone except regional operators—large companies responsible for the management of MSW in a specific region.

The actual implementation of the reform was repeatedly postponed, and the situation with MSW continued to worsen. This provoked public discontent with waste management policies, which reached a peak in 2018 through 2019. Numerous rallies and protests were organized against landfills, illegal dumping, and incineration facilities (Chmel et al., 2020). Although authorities reacted to the protests with repression, public discontent has succeeded in drawing attention to the problem. Waste reform goals were included in the federal project *Formation of an Integrated MSW Management System*, which are part of the national project *Ecology* (Wiesmeth & Starodubets, 2020).

Some civil society representatives and experts point out that the ambitious goals of the reforms are hardly achievable in the framework of the current approach to environmental policy. According to experts, aspects of the reform, such as the introduction of separate waste collection, had already failed before its implementation. The governmental understanding of “recycling” has also been criticized due to the lack of actual re-usage of the separated waste and its further incineration (Greenpeace, 2021).

Against the background of the waste system crisis and public rallies and protests, CSOs have become important players in waste policy. Some CSOs are part of the civic coalition *Alliance against incineration and for waste recycling* (Alliance). The primary idea of the Alliance is to address the Russian waste problem by the promotion of separate collection and recycling as an alternative to waste incineration. Nowadays, CSOs conduct many waste-related activities, such as providing information to the public, organizing clean-ups and events related to separate waste collection, and recycling. Some CSOs focus on community engagement and avoid direct criticism of the authorities. In contrast, others have a long-standing tradition of policy advocacy and the critique of legislation and organizing public campaigns (Wu & Martus, 2021).

METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

Data collection

The study relies on two types of empirical data: social media posts and interviews. Social media posts are used to examine what narratives CSOs employ. Interviews are used to understand why CSOs follow such a strategy and how they collaborate with governmental actors.

The first step of data collection was the selection of CSOs. To test our expectations, our sample had to include organizations that are involved in different activities. We, first, identified the most involved CSOs for the waste management debate: Greenpeace Russia, Razdelny Sbor, EKA, Musora Bolshe Net, and Center Economii Resursov (CER). These organizations are all active in service provision and all of them, except CER, are involved in policy advocacy. In addition, some are also involved in pressuring activities, in particular in the collection of signatures for petitions. In the next step, we identified organizations that work on waste policy on a regional level through the snowball method.

Seven organizations working at the regional and local levels were included in the study: Dvizhenie 42, EKA Azov, Ecomost, Zeleny Parovoz, Zelenaya Ulitsa, Podari Planete Zhizn, Grazhdanskaya Iniciativa Protiv Ecoprestupnosti (Grazhdanskaya Iniciativa). These organizations are all active in service provision, but only some of them are involved in policy advocacy. Grazhdanskaya Iniciativa and, to some extent, Dvishenie 42 have also been involved in pressuring. Grazhdanskaya Iniciativa was at the time of research the only organization with the “foreign agent” label. [Table 1](#) gives an overview of the main activities of the 12 CSOs. The classification in [Table 1](#) is only an estimation based on information from websites and on our own knowledge of the organizations. For our empirical analysis, we use the interviews to verify this estimation and to get more information on the CSOs’ main activities.

To examine the narrative strategies used in the public communication of CSOs, our empirical data are based on social media posts (Gupta et al., 2018; Merry, 2016, 2018, 2019). We chose to analyze text taken from social media due to their growing significance as a tool of communication by CSOs (Gol’brajh, 2021; Lovejoy & Saxton, 2012).

We included social media posts that were published on the 12 CSOs’ VKontakte accounts and Telegram channels between January 2017 and June 2021. VKontakte and Telegram are the most widely used Russian social media and messenger platforms which have the option to have publicly available channels (Fond “Obschestvennoe Mnenie”, 2021). These are also the most important channels of communication of the selected CSOs and thus form the empirical basis of this study.

We only included posts that were publicly available and excluded those in closed groups. We also excluded re-posts, since their contents do not originate from the CSOs themselves. Only

TABLE 1 Activities of CSOs

Service provision and education	Service provision and education policy advocacy	Service provision and education Advocacy Pressurizing
CER	Ecomost	Dvizhenie 42
EKA Azov	EKA	Grazhdanskaya Iniciativa
Podari Planete Zhizn	Musora Bolshe Net	Greenpeace Russia
Zeleny Parovoz		Razdelny Sbor
		Zelenaya Ulitsa

posts that correspond to the NPF definition of a policy narrative were included, that is, that they contain at least one character and refer to the waste policy solution or the waste problem (Shanahan et al., 2017, p. 176). Overall, 7752 posts were examined but a large majority of posts were excluded because they were not about waste management; most organizations work in the field of environmental protection and post on a variety of environmental issues. Other posts were excluded because they did not contain a character and, thus, are not considered a policy narrative. These excluded posts were mostly advertisements for events. Two CSOs (Dvizhenie 42 and Zeleny Parovoz) had a high number of policy narratives posted annually (more than 50 per year). For these two CSOs, we decided to only analyze a sample of 50% of randomly selected posts. Overall, 444 posts were included in the analysis, 92 (21%) in Telegram, and 352 (79%) from VKontakte. One organization consistently duplicated posts in both VKontakte and Telegram. For this CSO, we only included posts from Telegram.

In addition, 12 semi-structured interviews were conducted with representatives of the selected CSOs (one interview per CSO). The purpose of the interviews was to clarify how and why CSOs choose a specific communicative strategy and get information on their main activities. While the social media posts allowed us to identify the narrative strategies of organizations, the interviews helped us to receive more detailed information on how and why CSOs communicate the way they do in the restrictive Russian context. The interviews were conducted via video phone calls from April through July 2021 and lasted between 20 and 90 minutes. All interviews were conducted in Russian and transcribed for analysis. The interview questions focused on the CSOs' collaboration with policy-related actors (government, business, other NGOs), and the strategies and tools they use to communicate with the public. The interview guidelines can be found in [Appendix 1](#). To maintain the interviewees' anonymity, we used numbers and anonymized identifiers when referring to interview data in the results.

Coding and data analysis

The narratives from CSOs' social media accounts were coded using a systematic coding scheme ([Appendix 2](#)). The coding scheme was developed following the procedures proposed by Shanahan et al. (2017). We coded the following narrative elements as variables: characters (victims, villains, heroes), the policy problem, and the policy solution as the moral of the story. Each variable was binary, that is, we coded whether the narrative element was present or absent in the post. Heroes, victims, and villains were coded according to five categories (CSOs, government, businesses, citizens, and others) with the environment as an additional category for victims.

To examine intercoder reliability, we drew a random sample of 20% of all posts that were coded by another coder. We calculated the percentage agreement and Krippendorff's alpha (Krippendorff, 2003) on this sample and achieved good intercoder reliability results ([Appendix 3](#)).

To analyze the narrative strategies of CSOs, we calculated the devil-angel shift according to the formula developed by Shanahan et al. (2013) and modified in later studies (Gottlieb et al., 2018): $\text{devil-angel shift} = (\text{number of heroes} - \text{number of villains}) / (\text{number of heroes} + \text{number of villains})$. A score of +1 means a strong angel shift, while a score of -1 indicates a strong devil shift. In addition, we compared to what extent the narratives contain solutions and problems, as a measure for positive and negative narrative strategies respectively.

The interview transcripts were analyzed using qualitative content analysis based on Mayring (2010). The interview transcripts were coded along categories that we developed from our

research questions. The categories related to the main activities of CSOs, about how the CSOs communicate publicly about waste management, whether and how they criticize the government and governmental policy, the reasons why the CSOs chose a specific communicative strategy, and whether and how the CSOs collaborate with the government.

RESULTS

The “Results” section, first, describes the narrative strategies used by the CSOs. To do so, we show what type of characters the CSOs use in their narratives on social media. Second, we present the differences in devil-angel shift scores and in the mentioning of problems and solutions in the CSOs’ narratives to examine the differences in communication among organizations. Third, we link the strategies to the activities of NGOs and their relationship with the government.

Narrative strategies of CSO in the waste debate

The use of characters in the narratives from the CSOs’ social media posts provides an overview of the communicative strategies of CSOs. Table 2 presents what characters were defined as heroes, villains, and victims in the social media posts, as well as the total number of posts that contain heroes, villains, and victims. Overall, the narratives contain a higher number of heroes in comparison to villains and, even more so, victims. This provides some evidence that, generally, CSOs pursue a positive narrative strategy that focuses on heroes.

CSOs mostly depict themselves as heroes (48%). They also frequently portray citizens (25%) and businesses (22%) as heroes in their narratives. The main villains identified by CSOs are the government (20%) and businesses (16%). Many narratives also contain other villains (26%). This open category includes waste itself, single-use plastic, and incineration plants. At the same time, organizations never define themselves and other CSOs as villains in the waste debate. Citizens (14%) and the environment (11%) are mostly presented as victims. Organizations never depict the government as a victim.

To examine differences between communicative strategies between different CSOs, the devil-angel shift scores are used. Table 3 presents the devil-angel shift scores of all CSOs. A positive score equals an angel shift, while a negative score is a devil shift. These results also show that, overall, CSOs communicate with a positive narrative strategy by highlighting heroes rather than villains.

TABLE 2 The use of characters in CSOs’ narratives

	Hero, <i>n</i> (%)	Villain, <i>n</i> (%)	Victim, <i>n</i> (%)
CSO	212 (48%)	0 (0%)	5 (1%)
Government	39 (9%)	89 (20%)	0 (0%)
Businesses	99 (22%)	71 (16%)	7 (2%)
Citizens	111 (25%)	15 (3%)	61 (14%)
Environment	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	53 (11%)
Other	33 (7%)	115 (26%)	13 (6%)
Total (<i>N</i>)	494	290	139

TABLE 3 The use of devil-angel shift strategies by CSOs score

CSO	Total number of narratives	Devil-angel shift score	Standard deviation
Podari planete zhizn	5	1	0
EKA Azov	6	1	0
Zeleniy Parovoz	120	0.69	0.62
Dvizhenie 42	120	0.36	0.77
Musora Bolshe Net	15	0.16	0.75
Razdelniy Sbor	47	0.14	0.83
EKA	32	0.12	0.72
CER	22	-0.26	0.54
Zelenaya ulitsa	14	-0.31	0.82
Greenpeace	48	-0.32	0.77
Grazhdanskaya Iniciativa	9	-0.37	0.72
Ecomost	6	-0.5	0.41
Total	444	0.27	0.8

TABLE 4 Mentioning of problems and solutions in narratives

CSO	Narratives containing problems (%)	Narratives containing solutions (%)
Podari planete zhizn	0	5 (100%)
EKA Azov	1 (17%)	6 (100%)
Zeleniy Parovoz	64 (53%)	109 (91%)
Dvizhenie 42	85 (71%)	108 (90%)
Ecomost	5 (83%)	6 (100%)
CER	21 (95%)	22 (100%)
Greenpeace	42 (88%)	39 (81%)
EKA	29 (91%)	28 (88%)
Razdelniy Sbor	41 (87%)	40 (85%)
Musora Bolshe Net	13 (87%)	12 (80%)
Zelenaya ulitsa	10 (71%)	8 (57%)
Grazhdanskaya Iniciativa	9 (100%)	6 (67%)
Total	320 (72%)	389 (88%)

Results show that CSOs use different communicative strategies. Some use strong angel shifts (Podari Planete Zhizn, Eka Azov, Zeleny Parovoz, Dvizhenie 42), that is, their narratives focus on heroes as opposed to villains. Three organizations show a score close to zero. That is, they employ almost the same amount of heroes and villains but with a tendency toward more heroes—a weak angel shift (Musora bolshe net, Razdelny sbor, EKA). Others employ a devil shift, highlighting villains rather than heroes (CER, Zelenaya ulitsa, Greenpeace, Grazhdanskaya Iniciativa Protiv Ecoprestupnosti, and Ecomost).

Table 4 displays the number of posts containing problems and solutions per organization. The CSOs can again be divided into three groups, based on the extent to which they refer to problems or solutions in their narratives.

First, there are CSOs that focus more on solutions than on problems (Podari Planete Zhizn, EKA Azov, Zeleniy Parovoz, Dvizhenie 42, Ecomost). The second group consists of CSOs who pay approximately equal attention to both problems and solutions (Greenpeace, Razdelniy Sbor, Mysora Bolshe Net, EKA, CER). A third group includes CSOs that highlight problems more often than solutions (Zelenaya ulitsa and Grazhdanskaya initsiativa).

The use of the devil-angel shifts is in most cases consistent with the presentation of solutions and problems in the narratives. Those CSOs following a strong angel shift also highlight more solutions and those with a strong devil shift also draw attention to problems in their narratives. Only two organizations (Greenpeace and CER) display a (weak) devil shift but slightly more solutions than problems. Furthermore, the organization Ecomost displays a devil shift but includes more solutions than problems, although the number of narratives containing problems is high, too.

These results suggest that the CSOs have chosen different strategies to communicate about waste management. The narrative strategies are distributed on a spectrum between a negative narrative strategy based on a devil shift and a focus on problems and a positive narrative strategy with a focus on heroes and solutions. Some CSOs are situated in the middle, emphasizing both heroes and solutions, as well as villains and problems in their posts. Overall, the narrative strategies are consistent with the focus of activities of CSOs as displayed in Table 1 with two exceptions: CER is mainly involved in service provision and less in policy advocacy but nonetheless follows a slight devil shift. Dvizehnie 42, on the other hand, pursues an angel-shift strategy but is also involved in policy advocacy and in political activities such as organizing petitions. The next part relates these differences in communication among CSOs in more detail to their activities, to other characteristics of the CSOs, and to their relationship with the government.

Reasons for the choice of communicative strategies

The organizations that follow a positive narrative strategy with an angel shift and a focus on solutions are all smaller organizations that work at the local level in a specific region: Podari Planete Zhizn, Eka Azov, Zeleny Parovoz, and Dvizhenie 42. These CSOs are all involved in concrete educational activities and the promotion of sustainable behavior of citizens, such as the organization of separate waste collection at the local level. Only Dvizhenie 42 is also involved in pressurizing activities. These results provide evidence for the first expectation (*CSOs that are mainly involved in service provision and educational activities tend to employ a positive narrative strategy with angel shifts and a focus on policy solutions*).

Some of these CSOs that pursue a positive narrative strategy do not actively advocate policy change or a different implementation of government-driven policies. Others, however, also work together with the local governments in their respective regions in an attempt to improve waste management policy implementation. As one interviewee explains: “Of course, we interact with our government. To solve issues, personal relations are important. Through personal requests problems may be solved” (Interview 11). This organization also consciously avoids criticizing authorities, and the interviewee is convinced that a good relationship with the government is necessary to influence policy and improve the waste situation. She explains this position: “The lack of criticism in our public communication is a conscious decision. I do not like criticizing, and we do not know how to criticize ... it is essential to do something concrete” (Interview 11).

Others criticize policy but they avoid apportioning blame on concrete persons: “We do criticize ... But we try not to personalize it ... we always try to check the information, we refer to

expert opinions, we follow a strategy of moderate criticism...we try to write nothing very harsh or alarming, not to criticize strongly” (Interview 7). This CSO’s representative also explains that more radical criticism of the authorities would not be popular with their constituency, which is also a reason why the organization avoids criticism of the government. Another interviewee also mentions internal discussions about how to collaborate and communicate with the government: “internally, we have two camps, one does not want to collaborate with the authorities..., and the second camp is more diplomatic and thinks, well, even if they sometimes deceive us, we still need to deal with them” (interview 10). The representative of this CSO explains that, in their online communication, they try to praise governmental actors as much as possible.

The relationship of CSOs with regional authorities can also change over time. One representative of a CSO employing a positive narrative strategy recounts how she was invited to work with the government after the organization submitted a petition. The interaction stopped, however, after an article about her appeared in the local newspaper: “We collected two thousand signatures ... sent them to the governor, and ... they invited me to meetings and for two months there were literally two meetings a week, where I participated, and was invited with other activists, and then in March there was an article about me saying ‘who is she? ... she is a foreign agent’. And that’s it, after that we again lost contact with the officials” (Interview 7).

The CSOs in the middle of the spectrum (Greenpeace, Razdelniy Sbor, Mysora Bolshe Net, EKA, and CER), which highlight both problems and solutions and employ either a moderate devil or a moderate angel shift, are all organizations that operate at the national or, in the case of Greenpeace, at the international level. These organizations are involved in a large variety of activities. First, they implement projects and provide services to citizens and businesses to promote recycling and avoid waste, or they organize educational activities to directly influence the behavior of people to improve the situation. Second, another focus of these CSOs is to raise awareness about the waste problem. In doing so, they also openly criticize governmental policy if they do not agree with it. Third, all these organizations, except CER, are also involved in policy advocacy in an attempt to influence environmental policy formulation and implementation, and to do so, they also work together with governmental actors. Fourth, some of these CSOs, such as Greenpeace, are also involved in pressuring activities. These results provide some evidence for our second expectation (*CSOs that are mainly involved in policy advocacy and those that are involved in a variety of activities tend to employ a variety of strategies, that is, they use both angel and devil shifts and highlight problems and solutions in their narratives*).

A representative of one of these large CSOs explains their communication strategy in the following way: “We primarily appeal to the public, because we want to convey our ideas and involve people in our campaigns. The main goal of our communication is to change the attitude towards the waste problem and involve people in activities. ... We criticize if we see that the policy is wrong. When criticizing, we also urge people to take action - for example to send a letter to the authorities or to sign a petition” (Interview 1).

These larger organizations also work together with governmental actors in specific projects, public campaigns, or through working groups. One interviewee explains how they work with the government: “We interact with the authorities through public councils, public chambers, try to get into working groups, if possible and if it is within our competence, we correspond with the authorities, write reviews, write our opinions, ask questions, though they do not answer very well, to be honest, but sometimes they answer” (Interview 5). Although these CSOs work together with governmental actors, they also frequently criticize governmental policy. The head of one of those CSOs confirms that they criticize when they feel a need to do so: “If there is a reason, then yes, we use criticism in our public communication” (Interview 4). Another CSO

representative explains that they often criticize governmental policy but, nonetheless, collaborate with the government: “Well, since we often criticize the authorities, they do not always want to see us in a direct dialogue ... but we take part in the working group and can say at an open table ‘What the hell are you [authorities] doing?’” (Interview 5).

The head of another of these CSOs explains that advocacy work and interaction with governmental actors is usually not publicly communicated: “How we work with the government is not seen by our volunteers and ordinary people because it is a fairly quiet job. What we do is to try to improve the legislation. We usually sit and analyze what pitfalls there may be and try to offer our own solutions There is also direct communication, yes. Yesterday I was at the environmental council under the Governor” (Interview 2).

Among the small CSOs only two employ a negative strategy of displaying a devil shift and highlighting problems: Grazhdanskaya Iniciativa and Zelenaya ulitsa. However, the social media posts of these organizations only contain a small number of narratives on waste management. Thus, these results should be interpreted with caution. These two organizations are involved in campaigns and activities directed at citizens, such as educational activities to increase environmental awareness of citizens or the collection of waste for recycling. They also aim to increase pressure on the government to improve implementation of waste policy by sending petitions to the local government. One of them is also involved in policy advocacy and is in contact with governmental actors, for example, by participating in the local environmental council. A representative of this CSO explains that their organization does not have the human and financial resources to communicate more actively. They focus their resources on concrete activities with citizens: “Our task is to educate people, to promote a responsible attitude towards the environment, and not to criticize the authorities. I do not see any point in spending my resources on criticizing the government” (Interview 9). However, this organization uses social media to raise awareness to problems, such as with landfills or incineration plants, which may explain their devil-shift score.

The other organization does not collaborate with the government, at all. This CSO was, at the time of research, labeled as a foreign agent. Their head explains that the regional environmental council invites sometimes civil society actors to discussions, but this CSO is not among them. In his view, civil society participation in this council is pure window dressing: “They created these councils and invited people, who are convenient for them. At our council, they invited people who have not much to do with ecology”. In their online communication, the organization mainly aims to draw attention to problems to raise awareness that something needs to be done.

Our data could partly support the third expectation (*CSOs that are mainly involved in pressurizing through confrontational political activities tend to employ a negative narrative strategy with a devil shift and a focus on problems*). Those CSO that display a devil shift are all involved in pressurizing activities. However, our sample did not include organizations that entirely focus on pressurizing; all of them are mostly involved in service provision or policy advocacy.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This article has asked the questions of how different CSOs communicate about public policy in an authoritarian context, and of why CSOs choose a specific communicative strategy. The results of a narrative analysis of the social media posts of 12 Russian CSOs about waste management shows that, overall, CSOs follow a positive narrative strategy with an angel shift and a focus on policy solutions. However, results also show that the spectrum of communicative strategies is broad. Smaller CSOs mostly focus on educational activities and service provision and only to

a certain extent on policy advocacy. They employ, overall, a positive narrative strategy with an angel shift and a focus on solutions. Even when these CSOs are involved in policy advocacy they tend to refrain from criticizing the government. Larger CSOs that are involved in a variety of activities tend to employ both positive and negative strategies: the angel-devil shift score of these CSOs is around zero and their narratives include about the same number of problems and solutions. Only a few CSOs display a devil shift, but those that do are also involved in pressurizing activities.

These results illustrate, first, how CSOs work under the pressure of authoritarianism. Second, results also contribute to the ongoing discussion about what drives policy actors' strategies (Chang & Koebele, 2020; Gottlieb et al., 2018; Schlaufer, Gafurova, et al., 2021). Third, this research builds on qualitative NPF studies based on interviews (Gray & Jones, 2016) to further understand why a certain strategy is selected. These three points are now discussed in more detail.

First, this research provides insights on how CSOs work and communicate in an authoritarian environment by providing an illustrative case of the communicative strategies of Russian CSOs. Literature suggests that authoritarian systems tend to restrict the activities of politically active CSOs, while building relationships with CSOs that provide services to citizens (Bindman et al., 2019; Toepler et al., 2020). Our results illustrate how CSOs react to this dual approach. The CSOs in our sample all focus on service provision for citizens, such as organizing separate waste collection or educational events for children, while limiting political activism. Some CSOs consciously avoid criticizing the government, because they prefer to have a good relationship with authorities. Others do not have sufficient resources, and, therefore, focus their resources on concrete activities and not on communication. The lack of resources is, among others, also due to the Russian restrictive policy that impedes access to foreign funds for CSOs. These results confirm previous research that shows how CSOs react to a restrictive environment, namely, by limiting activities, refusing foreign funds, and avoiding public criticism (Kefner & Morgun, 2020; Tulaeva et al., 2017).

Second, this research further develops the ongoing NPF debate on what drives narrative strategies (Chang & Koebele, 2020; Gottlieb et al., 2018; Schlaufer, Gafurova, et al., 2021). Schlaufer, Gafurova, et al. (2021) suggest that actors' objectives can be used as predictor for narrative strategies and propose two objectives to be achieved with narratives: promoting policy solutions through positive narrative strategies and drawing attention to problems through negative narrative strategies. We suggest that a broader spectrum of objectives could be included and draw on the literature on communicative strategies of NGOs that highlight more refined aspects of these broader objectives such as education of citizens, awareness raising, or pressurizing policymakers (Figenschou, 2020; Gurung, 2014; Lovejoy & Saxton, 2012). Our findings suggest that an angel shift is rather used in communication aimed at the education of citizens and the support for service provision. A devil shift rather suits communication aimed at pressurizing policymakers. Awareness raising and policy advocacy may include both angel- and devil shifts. While previous NPF studies on narrative strategies of CSOs on social media do not distinguish along objectives of communication, their findings may also support such an explanation. For example, Gupta et al. (2018) found that Greenpeace used a negative narrative strategy in the debate on nuclear energy. This could be explained by the objectives of Greenpeace to raise attention to the problem of nuclear energy or to pressurize policymakers into adopting a restrictive policy toward nuclear energy. In another study, Merry (2016) found that both sides in the U.S. gun policy debate use positive narrative strategies, which could not be explained by their winning or losing status in the debate but is arguably related to the objectives these interest groups want to achieve through their communication. However, the

comparison with these NPF studies from liberal democracies is only partly valid. The CSOs in our study have adapted their communication as a reaction to a repressive environment. More research is needed to further conceptualize the link between objectives and narrative strategies and to test this relationship in democratic contexts.

Third, this research followed a call by Gray and Jones (2016) to incorporate qualitative methods into the NPF. This approach allowed us to get a more nuanced understanding of how the authoritarian context influences narratives.

This research also has certain limitations. First, our sample did not include CSOs that exclusively focus on confrontational political activities such as the organization of protests. Only a few such CSOs exist in the Russian context, and these were not willing to give an interview, nor do they have any social media communication that could be analyzed. Second, the communicative strategies of CSOs were not examined over time. The behavior of Russian CSOs is, arguably, shaped by the changing environment these organizations face. Future research may examine how the communication strategies of CSOs have changed over time relative to the growing restrictions they face, such as after the adoption of the foreign agent law. Moreover, at the time the data collection was conducted, Russia's competitive authoritarianism still allowed for civil society activities that are somewhat independent and critical. However, since then, repression has tremendously increased, and whether and how CSOs will collaborate with the government and communicate in this restrictive setting needs to be examined by future research.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The authors would like to thank Victor Albert and Artem Uldanov for helpful suggestions with regard to the general idea of the manuscript and data collection. We would like to thank all members of our research and study group for their feedback on earlier versions of the manuscript. The publication was prepared within the framework of the Academic Fund Program at the National Research University Higher School of Economics (HSE) in 2020–2021 (grant no. 20-04-003) and by the Russian Academic Excellence Project “5-100.” Open access funding provided by Universitat Bern.

FUNDING INFORMATION

Academic Fund Program at the National Research University Higher School of Economics (HSE University) in 2020–2021, Grant/Award Number: 20-04-003; Russian Academic Excellence Project 5-100

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

Tatiana Chalaya is an employee of Greenpeace. Other authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ CSOs are defined by the United Nations as “Non-State, not-for-profit, voluntary entities formed by people in the social sphere that are separate from the State and the market. CSOs represent a wide range of interests and ties. They can include community-based organizations as well as non-governmental organizations (NGOs)” (UN Guiding Principles, 2022). This article explicitly uses the term CSO to include both formalized NGOs and informal grassroots movements and community-based organizations.

- ² Determines the procedure for the creation, operation and liquidation of structural divisions of foreign NGOs on the territory of the Russian Federation.
- ³ Allows for ordinary citizens and informal organizations (ones not registered as legal entities) to be considered as “foreign agents” if they are involved in political activity in Russia and receive assistance from abroad.
- ⁴ Allows to declare the activities of a foreign NGO that poses a threat to the foundations of the constitutional system of the Russian Federation, the country’s defense capability or the security of the state “undesirable on the territory of the Russian Federation.”
- ⁵ While Chang and Koebele (2020) distinguish between reform-focused policy positions and status-quo oriented policy positions, Schlaufer, Gafurova, et al. (2021, p. 15) suggest that this distinction does not accurately describe all possible policy positions, as not all policy actors who oppose reforms are in favor of the status quo. In some cases, actors may oppose reforms and the status quo. In other cases, neither side is satisfied with the status quo, and different actors propose different reforms. Thus, Schlaufer, Gafurova, et al. (2021) suggest distinguishing between pro-reform and anti-reform policy positions.

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How to cite this article: Schlaufer, C., Pilkina, M., Chalaya, T., Khaynatskaya, T., Voronova, T., & Pozhivotko, A. (2022). How do civil society organizations communicate in an authoritarian setting? A narrative analysis of the Russian waste management debate. *Review of Policy Research*, 39, 730–751. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ropr.12492>

APPENDIX 1

SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW GUIDELINES

1. What are the activities of your organization in the field of waste management?
2. How do you see your role in the waste management system in ... (add the name of the city/region/Russia)?
3. What solutions to the current waste problem does your organization propose?
4. How does your organization promote these solutions?
5. Do you collaborate with governmental actors? [you can add regional, local ones, make examples...] How do you collaborate with them?
6. Do you collaborate with businesses? With what businesses? How do you collaborate with them?
7. Through what channels do you communicate with the public?
8. To whom do you address your communication over social media such as Vkontakte and Telegram?
9. What are the goals of your communication over social media? Do you think that you can achieve these goals? How does public communication over social media help to improve waste policy?
10. How do you communicate with governmental and with business actors?
11. Do you criticize governmental waste management policy on social media? Why / why not?
12. Do you think that NGOs can influence governmental waste management policy? If so, to what extent?

APPENDIX 2

ABBREVIATED CODEBOOK

Name of variable	Description of variable, coding instruction
Hero	Does the text contain a hero? Hero = a character who takes action with purpose to achieve or oppose a policy solution. 0 = absence, 1 = presence Who is/are the hero(es) in the text? Please type
Villain	Does the text contain a villain? Villain = a character who creates harm, or inflicts damage or pain upon a victim or, in other cases as one who opposes the hero. 0 = absence, 1 = presence Who is/are the villain(s) in the text? Please type
Victim	Does the text contain a victim? Victim = a character who is harmed by the waste management problem, or a particular action or inaction related to the waste problem. 0 = absence, 1 = presence Who is/are the victim(s) in the text? Please type
Moral	Does the text make an explicit reference to a policy solution that is put forth as an answer to the waste management problem? 0 = absence, 1 = presence If yes, type the proposed solution
Problem	Does the text make an explicit reference to a problem related to waste management? 0 = absence, 1 = presence If yes, type the described problem

APPENDIX 3

INTERCODER AGREEMENT

Variable	Percentage agreement	Krippendorff's alpha
Hero	93	0.78
Villain	97	0.90
Victim	96	0.81
Moral	92	0.69
Problem	94	0.83