

# Civil society in russia

Society



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Introduction.

The term “civil society” in Russia is rarely referred to something other than to the civic organisations and movements created during and after the break-up of the Soviet Union (start of the 1990’s). Never the less this paper will look at the “civil society” term in Russia more widely and insidely. I will talk more and discuss about our time “civil society”, which came in in the end of the 90’s with the Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin’s ascension on the presidency. Putin re-established a top-down order in Russia and has proved to be quite antagonistic both to Western foreign policy and to pro-Western civil society groups. However, both capitalism and multiparty democracy continued their uncertain paths in Russia through the last decade.

After two terms as president, Putin handed over to Dmitri Medvedev and therefore he built a so called monopoly in the hidden “Dictatorship” in the Russian political sphere. Total domination until the inability of being the ruling force of the country will come in but even then he has a cut back plan of Medvedev and some later chosen candidate, that will help Medvedev make same what Putin did, with getting the presidentship back in his hands as soon as possible. Looking to the future, the paper highlights two main trends.

First, the continuation of Russia’s tradition of civic and political activism, seen most dramatically in the mass demonstrations in Moscow and other cities. Second, the major steps made by CSOs and local government in implementing social partnership, with new funds from the state that both replace and build on the contributions of foreign donors during 1995-2005.

History.

The beginnings of Russian civil society.

The first stage (1760-1860) flows out of Catherine the Great's reforms to the Russian estates and was characterized by the creation of public organizations related to science, literature, the arts, leisure and charitable activities. These included famous and influential associations like the Russian Geographical Society, the Free Economics Society, the Moscow Agricultural Society, the Russian Technical Society, and the Pirogov's Association of Russian Doctors. These societies were set up with hopes for friendly cooperation with the Tsarist authorities and in the second half of the 19th century their members played a key role lobbying for social and legal reform.

Civil society growth under Tsarism.

Russia's second stage of civil society development began with the Great Reforms ushered in by Tsar Alexander II in the 1860s. Serfdom was abolished, basic civil rights were established in law, and the first steps taken in the creation of a local government system. CSOs expanded gradually, became more professional, and began to provide educational and health support to vulnerable groups across the country. At the same time industrialization and urbanization gathered pace in Russia. The extension of the railway system across Siberia to the Pacific was one of the most dramatic examples of this in the late 19th century.

Though , the development of capitalist relations in the economy was not mirrored by political changes. The period of reforms gave way to a new period of repression and political stagnation, and the state was challenged

by increasingly radical political forces such as the Popularitists(Narodniki) with their “ to the people” movement, culminating in the 1905 revolution. Many voluntary associations were radicalized too (including almost all the scientific societies noted above).

Significantly, the only law passed in Tsarist time devoted to public organizations was issued by the Senate in the immediate aftermath of the first Russian Revolution, in March 1906. In the next few years, almost 5, 000 new organizations, societies and unions were registered. However, once again this reforming, liberalizing movement ran into opposition from the state and with the crisis that was brought into the country because of the participation and taking a huge part and playing important role in World War I.

Civil society in the Soviet period.

The Soviet period (1917 to the mid-1980s) is the third stage in Russia’s civil society development, notable for the “ nationalization of civil society institutions”. Again, there were stages when popular activity flowered. The Soviet arts, cultural and scientific avant-garde of the 1920s is well known, but less well known are the local movements, peasants’ and proletarian organizations that emerged all around the country. For example, every settlement/district had its own Peasant Mutual Society and the Central Bureau catered to the welfare needs of students much as voluntary associations had done before the revolution. However, in the 1930s this phase gave way to a period of repression and political regimentation - occasioned by the Soviet government’s decision to forcibly collectivize agriculture and go for rapid industrialization.

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This “ required state-oriented CSOs which were to drive the foundation of socialism”. The voluntary associations created in the 1920s “ offered alternative ways of solving social problems” but the authorities “ doubted the utility of voluntary movements and the reliability of their participants.” Thousands were shut down in the 1930s and new associations set up in their stead, as part of the government machine. It was not until the late 1950s-early 1960s that citizens’ organizations of a less politicized type began to re-emerge, encouraged by Khrushchev’s denunciation of Stalin and the political thaw that followed.

Russian analysts have identified about 40 of these, operating mainly within the arts and scientific fields under the patronage of Communist Party bodies and subject to the latter’s decisions on policy and personnel matters. By the Brezhnev period, associations were active among groups as varied as war veterans, professional designers and those involved in child welfare. Civil society now included the dissident movement. Dissidents developed various modes of resistance to the Soviet state - writing and publishing artistic or journalistic critiques of the regime, creating a variety of informal circles and discussion groups, and making statements on political and human rights issues that brought down considerable persecution on themselves.

But they had many sympathizers and considerable impact on the political atmosphere in the country and its reputation abroad. The dissident movement included not only western-leaning liberals, but also strident nationalists and religious activists from many of the constituent republics of the USSR

Transition period to our times.

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“ Civil society” played a huge role in dissident ideology in Eastern Europe and the USSR in the 1980s. When the communist regimes collapsed one after the other it seemed to many people that an entirely new society was being born. Many different analyses of “ newly-created” civil society in the region were built around this view. Twenty years later and with the benefit of new historical research, most experts in the region see things differently. The current stage of civil society development in Russia is a fourth stage, starting in the mid-1980s and continuing to the present day. The movement for perestroika and glasnost led by Gorbachev was designed to solve the USSR’s pressing economic crisis (caused by the arms race and economic competition with the West) and to shore up the legitimacy of one-party rule. But it led instead to the collapse of the communist system.

Many of the most active civil society sectors today can trace their origins to the 1980s – not just the human rights groups, but also the environmental movement with its active networks among young people and in the regions. The adoption of a law on public associations in the late soviet period, supported by subsequent Russian Federation laws regulating public and charitable activity, opened the door to CSO registration for all-comers. However, under Yeltsin’s successor Putin, the environment for civil society changed significantly.

On the one hand, Putin accelerated a process initiated under Yeltsin – government financing of the sector (mainly via contracting out social services to CSOs), and set up a national structure of Public Councils to dialogue with and co-opt the sector. On the other hand, in 2006 he introduced regulations limiting the influence of foreign donors. The study’s

authors call this policy “import substitution”; the replacement of foreign models and funding by national programs, self-organization and local philanthropy.

Russian civil society today.

General features of the sector

After two decades of transition, analysts of current developments in Russia are beginning to gain a balanced view of the civil society sector.

Civil society in Russia, is showing more attention to the detail, shows that elements of continuity and change, tradition and innovation, exist alongside one another. Here is what I can say on that theme: • civil society activists today are “a strong minority of citizens” who deserve more support • Informal networks are important for civil society, especially in rural areas because they include a large membership and their ability and readiness to provide vital daily services, plus often good links with government • Foreign funding has had a positive effect in many areas (for example, it helped open up dialogue on many issues like feminism, domestic violence and others)

• Mafia-type groupings have had a powerful and negative effect at all levels in Russia – even “co-opting the role of civil society” • The millionaires or “oligarchs” that emerged during the 1990s preferred not to work through formal or wider business associations; hence they contributed little to civil society development. So Russia surely has a civil society. The question is how to develop it further, from local to national level. Here is some thoughts on that part because there are many different opinions from different

experts on that note. I will try to suggest the best possible ways of improving it and making it stronger and more vulnerable to what tries to hurt it.

- Civic engagement: the level of public activity in stable periods is moderate, but CSOs have shown they can mobilize quickly when the external situation demands
- Level of organization: Russian civil society is still in a difficult period of organizational development
- Practice of values: CSO members and activists refer to non-violence, tolerance and internal democracy as being among the most important for the sector
- Perception of impact: the general image of civil society is not equal from internal and external points of view. CSOs themselves rate their social and political impact as higher than the scores given by external experts
- External environment: the majority of the population do not approve of corruption, tax evasion, and so on.

These positive social attitudes could potentially act as a catalyst for further civil society development.

- Consultative mechanisms. Set up by Putin in 2004, the national Public Chamber has 126 members, selected in equal numbers by the President, public organizations, and Russia's regions. The aim was to develop the space for civil society and intersectional dialogue. Gradually, this model has been extended across Russia. Critics said they would prove to be mere “ window-dressing to legitimize the government's increasingly authoritarian policies”, but at local level many NGO supporters have proved willing to give them a try. (A survey found that 60% of activists would participate if asked, while 16% wouldn't, 181)

In all of these developments, a clear gap can be seen between advanced and less advanced elements in civil society and government. The rural areas lag

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behind the cities, the remote regions lag behind the industrial centres. The character of political opposition to the regime is quite different in the regions. As the demonstrations of autumn 2011 and spring 2012 showed, present-day 'dissidents' in Moscow and St Petersburg tend to be middle-class, liberal and western-leaning. However, in the Urals and Siberia, many of the most strident activists are from the communist and nationalist camps.

Conclusion and perspectives.

In December 2011, Russia was admitted to WTO (18 years after first applying) and all that remained was for the Duma to ratify the agreement. In March 2012, Putin returned as President for a new seven-year term. Thus, for the alter-globalization movement as for other dissident forces, a new period of struggle lies ahead to win a greater degree of social and economic justice and a more democratic society in Russia. On the other hand, Putin has promised to priorities social issues and CSOs are well placed to work for positive results in this area. This is a kind of "crossroads" for Russian civil society - will activists and organizations collaborate or conflict with government?

None can say surely but it is likely that many will opt for the first of these strategies, so they face the challenge of how to resist incorporation and maintain their own agenda during the negotiations. Both the democracy and the alter-globalization movements face the challenge of how to coordinate their activities, combine different viewpoints, and communicate more effectively with the general public. The activists involved in social issues at local level have put energy and ideas into setting up grants contests, ensuring transparency in awarding contracts.

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Now they need to focus on the development, implementation and monitoring of longer term programs - whether carried out by NGOs or government itself. Only a truly independent position will enable them to work effectively in difficult areas like anti-corruption, anti-racism or the protection of minority rights.