

INTRODUCTION

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For those concerned with democratization in the communist world, the final years of the Soviet Union were a truly exhilarating time. At the end of the Gorbachev era, the Soviet Union experienced an explosion of grassroots nongovernmental activity. For the first time in nearly a century, civic groups, trade unions, political parties, and newspapers organized and operated independent of the state.¹ In the final year preceding the collapse of the USSR, these newly formed organizations also cooperated with each other, forming horizontal links in their shared quest to challenge the Soviet system. Most impressive were the miner's strikes in 1989 and again in 1991, as well as the mass demonstrations on Manezh Square in downtown Moscow that occurred repeatedly throughout fall 1990 and spring 1991. At times, hundreds of thousands filled the expansive square. Russian society was politicized, organized, and mobilized. The Soviet state had to respond. Occurring in the shadow of decades of totalitarian rule in the Soviet Union, this kind of social activity was remarkable. The proliferation of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and exponential rise in citizen participation in these groups fueled hope that a proto-civil society was taking root—one capable of strengthening Russia's young and tenuous democracy.

A decade later, the nongovernmental sector still exists. By one estimate, more than 200,000 NGOs have formed over the last decade, with well-developed organizations in every major sector of civil society.² Yet, these tens of thousands of organizations and their members do not appear to be contributing to the consolidation of democracy in Russia to the degree that they and their observers and supporters had hoped earlier in the decade. Today, Russian civil society appears weak, atomized, apolitical, and heavily dependent on Western assistance for support. This type of civil society, critics argue, has little influence over state actions and policies and therefore lacks capacity for playing a meaningful role in intermediating interests between the state and individuals. Many analysts of Russian

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politics cite the weakness of civil society as testimony to the absence of a liberal democracy in Russia.

Why has civil society in Russia failed to fulfill the expectations of this sector that were so widely held on the eve of Soviet collapse? To what extent is there a correlation between the rate of civil society development and the pace of democratic consolidation in Russia? Can it even be justifiably claimed that a civil society has developed in today's Russia, and what factors obstruct its further development? Although many have already rendered pessimistic verdicts on Russian civil society, fewer have discussed the dynamics and constraints of its development.

To help fill this analytical void, *Demokratizatsiya* devotes this issue and the next to reassessing the development of civil society in Russia in a comparative context. In examining this elephant called Russian civil society, we have attempted to register many different views of the beast. In this issue, articles by John Squier and Marcia Weigle look at civil development as a whole, both from a historical and theoretical point of view. Accompanying these overview pieces is a view of the big picture from the inside by Jane Buchanan and Alexander Nikitin, one of Russia's most important societal activists. Nikitin and Buchanan discuss the results of the state-sponsored Civil Forum, held in November 2001, as a way to portray the current stage of civil society development in Russia more generally. In the next issue, Alfred Evans, Vladimir Gelman, and Henry Hale continue the general discussion of the development of civil society, but with very different approaches. Evans takes stock of current thinking among Russian scholars about civil society, while Gelman analyzes the importance of elites' agreement for the development of the Russian political system as a whole. Hale offers another framework for explaining Russian civil society by contrasting the liberal approach to civil society analysis dominant in the West with a statist model that is more prominent in Russian discussions of this question. Marc Morjé Howard's contribution to the second issue places Russia in a comparative framework, an exercise frequently ignored by students of Russian politics. To provide a similar comparative look at the Russian case, Mark Lenzi discusses the development of civil society in Belarus. In this comparison set (Russia versus Belarus), Russian civil society looks pretty good!

Other authors slice into individual sectors of Russian civil society. In the present issue, Lisa McIntosh Sundstrom chronicles the multiple currents of women's organizations, explaining the rift between elite, Western-oriented groups and more grassroots organizations not exposed to Western norms and money. Laura Henry does the same for the environmental movement, finding a split similar to that discussed by Sundstrom. Stephen Crowley examines the development of trade unions, an often-neglected sector of civil society studies in the postcommunist world. In adopting a wider lens for the analysis of human rights, Jonathan Weiler discusses the growing violation of the human rights of some of those most vulnerable in Russian society—prisoners and abused women.

The next issue includes two more slices of Russian society often not incorporated into analyses of civil society. Ivan Kurilla looks at the contributions of communist groups to society's organization in a single region, contending that this

old social capital still serves a useful purpose in postcommunist Russia. In his analysis of nationalist groups, Andreas Umland suggests the opposite—that *new* groups can sometimes play a negative role for the development of Russian civil society.³

Russian Civil Society Exists—A Nontrivial Fact

Although uncoordinated, some common themes do emerge in many of these articles. Regarding the existence of civil society or not, most authors in these two issues answer in the affirmative. Civil society in Russia does not play the same political or social role that civil society performs in the United States or other developed democracies. In particular, several authors identify the disconnect between state institutions and societal organizations, some stressing that this is a legacy of the Soviet era and others contending that it is a more recent development that resulted directly from policies pursued by Russian presidents Boris Yeltsin and Vladimir Putin. The weak influence of civic organizations on the state is not evidence for the absence of societal organizations altogether. On the contrary, many (though not all) authors contend that more societal activity is occurring within Russia than most presume. As several authors point out, Western analysts often overlook this civil society development because (a) they are focused only on those NGOs with Western contacts, which may in fact be only a small minority of Russian groups; (b) they deploy a liberal lens or use Western categories of “impact” and “influence” and do not assess Russia’s development compared to the Soviet past or even the region; (c) they dismiss groups associated with the Soviet past; or (d) they focus only on national level politics. Given the power of the state and their own weakness, Russian groups have adopted different missions and pursue alternative strategies than their counterparts in the West. Problems facing the development of Russian civil society, as Howard argues forcefully, are not unique to Russia but typical for the region. Russian civil society is not well, but it is alive.

Barriers to Further Civil Society Development

Although suggesting that civil society in Russia exists, most authors also recognize a similar set of barriers to civil development in Russia. Five are most important—the Soviet legacy, the structural features of the Russian economy, institutional components of the Russian state, policy decisions made by Yeltsin and Putin, and societal exhaustion.

Kurilla’s essay makes an important correction to the overgeneralization that everything inherited from the Soviet era was bad for civil society development or democracy more generally. At the same time, few would argue that much of the Soviet inheritance impeded civil society development. No political system has ever been more hostile to civil society than the communist totalitarian regime erected by Stalin. Although pre-Soviet Russia also gave the state pride of place and limited the arenas of autonomous society, even the tsars—especially after 1861—allowed important nongovernmental organizations to exist. The Soviet Union did not.⁴ Since Marxist theory predicted an end to all political and social

conflict after the proletariat revolution, organization for the sake of any particularistic interest had no place in a communist society. Divergent group interests were to be transcended; the interest of all became the interest of one, embodied by the state. In keeping with ideological dictates, the Soviet state's most salient characteristic became a virtual destruction of the space between the individual and the state, the space that in noncommunist states is occupied by institutions of civil society—social networks, private business, public associations, clubs, church groups, labor unions, and so forth. These institutions were either rooted out altogether or absorbed into the sprawling state and the Communist Party, so that all social exchange was carried out under the guise of the party-state. This system atrophied slowly and consistently after the death of Stalin. Nonetheless, we should not be surprised that the shadow of seventy years of communist rule still remains a decade later. In noncommunist transitions, the basic principles of the social and economic system did not change with political liberalization, allowing for a stratified and well-articulated civil society to be “resurrected” during liberalization.⁵ Russia, however, had no civil society to resurrect. Given this historical legacy, the stories of societal activism described in these two issues are all the more amazing.

Another barrier to civil society development in Russia is the economy and the structure of organized interests that have emerged in response to Russia's particular postcommunist marketization. When the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, the people and organizations that benefited from the Soviet economy did not cease to exist. On the contrary, these groups organized to defend their interests. The director's corps, in cooperation with trade unions organized in the Soviet era, moved aggressively to defend/seize their property rights at the enterprise level.⁶ This coalition proved to be a very effective interest group during the first years of the post-Soviet era. Later in the decade, a new group of economic actors—the oligarchs—emerged as a result of rents and insider privatizations allowed by the Russian government.⁷ In all capitalist societies, big business is always the most organized part of society.⁸ In Russia, however, the space for small businesses is especially small. The combination of these “red directors” in control of mammoth Soviet-era enterprises and Russia's oligarchs has squeezed the middle class as an economic force, a highly deleterious development for Russia's emerging civil society, since the middle class often provides the bulk of funding and participation for NGOs in developed democracies. More generally, the entire Russian economy has endured a severe depression for most of the 1990s, making scarce resources for nonessential activities for most of Russia's population. People simply have neither the time nor money to support public goods, when the acquisition of private goods has been such a struggle.

In addition to historical legacies and socioeconomic structures, several authors in these volumes also emphasize the role that Russian political actors have played in the development of Russian civil society. Individual decisions at the top of the state had implications for society development from below. As the focus of attention turned to economic transformation in the winter of 1992, Yeltsin's government actively sought to demobilize society. Their logic was simple. In the tran-

sition from communism to capitalism, the standard of living of the majority of Russians inevitably had to fall in the short term. This was the “shock” part of shock therapy. If society were mobilized politically, then it would respond to this negative economic turn by resisting reforms. Some went so far to conclude that democracy was not compatible with economic reform in the short run. Consequently, Yeltsin did not convoke new elections after the collapse of the Soviet Union. The first post-Soviet election in Russia took place in December 1993, two years after the Soviet dissolution. He spent little time creating a pro-reform, pro-presidential political party. Instead, Yeltsin and his team devoted their energies to strengthening the executive branch of government at the federal and regional levels, a strategy that required open cooperation with regional leaders previously considered communist and anti-democratic. More generally, Yeltsin’s political strategy for pursuing economic reform was to co-opt elites and interest groups from the Soviet system. Yeltsin also promoted the emergence of new interest groups, but only at the elite level. Instead of building constituencies for reform within society, Yeltsin and his advisers hoped that society would resume a passive position regarding the state’s activity. For the most part, society did re-adopt this passive response.

To assert that Yeltsin’s policies aimed to demobilize society and insulate the state from societal pressures does not mean that Yeltsin or his new government sought to suppress civil society. On the contrary, Yeltsin’s government created the legal public space for civil society to grow. The 1993 constitution provided for the protection of basic civil liberties—the freedoms of speech, press, religion, association, and peaceful assembly—rights without which civil society could not survive. In 1995, with presidential backing, the Russian Duma passed three laws—the Law on Public Associations, the Law on Philanthropic Activities and Organizations, and the Law on Noncommercial Organizations—that secured the legal standing of independent groups, set the rules governing their activities, and outlined their rights. These and other relevant laws were not masterpieces of jurisprudence, and have subsequently proved to be often discriminatory and obstructive to the proliferation of independent activity. However, one should not forget that for the first time in Russian and Soviet history, society could act legally independent from the state, and even in opposition to it.

To date, Putin’s political reforms seem even less friendly to civil society development than those during the Yeltsin era. Putin’s government has been criticized as being more inimical to civil society development than was his predecessor’s, curbing its activity in some areas, co-opting it in others, and rendering the institutional environment less friendly to civic activism in general. In response to the events of Putin’s first years in power, a certain degree of remobilization can be seen at the elite level, and less prominently at the grassroots levels. As the conclusions of many of the articles in these two issues suggest, however, the immediate future for civil society development looks less promising today than it did at the beginning of Putin’s tenure.

A fourth set of barriers, related to the third, is the kind of political institutions in place in contemporary Russia. Other democratic institutions must be present for

civil society to perform these vertical and horizontal functions. Civil society must work in concert with, and not against, political institutions, supported by the rule of law and the state apparatus.⁹ Most fundamentally, elections and representative institutions already must be in place for civic groups to contribute to democratic consolidation. Powerful social movements and nongovernmental organizations, be it Solidarity in Poland or the African National Congress in South Africa, fostered the transition from authoritarian rule, but they did not represent the interests of their constituents within the state until after democratic institutions emerged.

Regrettably, the particular kind of democratic institutions to emerge in Russia so far impede the articulation of interests within and before the state.¹⁰ Yeltsin's introduction of a presidential system followed by the strengthening of executives at the regional level has limited the opportunities for influence and engagement of civic organizations. Mass-based civic groups are much more successful at working with parliaments than executives.¹¹ Although the newly elected parliament in 1993 housed neonationalists, communists, and liberals, the president and his government remained relatively autonomous from the legislative branch in defining and administering public policies. This institutional arrangement carried a very clear implication for nonstate actors. If they sought influence over state decisions, the executive branch was the only entity worth building connections with; allying with members of the legislature, the natural partners of societal actors, became a thoroughly ineffective strategy. But it was the executive branch that was most dominated by the oligarchs.

A functioning judicial system is another key support institution for civil society; nonstate actors need the courts to serve as reliable means of redress, and the rule of law to provide stable and clear rules of operation. In the United States, for instance, disenfranchised and oppressed groups—be they minorities, women, or labor groups—used the courts system as an effective tool for change. Russian civil society has no such channel available.

Russia's postcommunist state is also poor and ineffective, attributes that reduce incentives for societal actors to interact with it. Even if Yeltsin's government was willing to respond to the interests of pluralist groups rather than rent-seeking corporate groups, the state he created rarely had the capacity to meet these demands. Just like the Soviet economy, the Soviet state also collapsed in fall 1991. For most of the 1990s, the Russian state grew in size, but lost capacity to provide public goods. By the beginning of Yeltsin's second term, the CIS region ranked dead last in 1997 World Bank World Development Report in the category of state performance of core functions, even lower than the underdeveloped nations of Sub-Saharan Africa. When the state lacks the capacity to carry out these core functions, no amount of societal influence could produce any tangible results. This obvious decline discouraged societal actors from engaging government, and turned them "inward," as they looked simply to survive and fill the gap in service and goods provision left by the unreformed and ineffective state and neglected by the market.

The weakness of Russia's liberal political parties constitutes a further institutional impediment to the growth and development of the liberal, democratic spec-

trum of social organizations in Russia. Parties and NGOs in Russia, especially on the liberal side of the political ledger, have not worked effectively to influence electoral and policy outcomes, because each perceives the other as a weak and ineffective partner. Instead, parties have sought electoral resources from other outlets such as the oligarchs and connections to the state, while Russian NGOs have tended to avoid the electoral process altogether. Civic organizations rightly saw little benefit from participating in the electoral process, while political parties discerned no electoral benefit from catering to small and ineffective civic groups.

Finally, in all transitions to democracy and especially those combined with transitions to a market economy, civic groups undergo an inevitable degree of demobilization after the collapse of the *ancien regime*. During the authoritarian phase, civic groups often form to oppose the existing regime. When the old system falls, the *raison d'être* of these civic groups also disappears.¹² The difficulties of adapting to a new economic system further dampen enthusiasm and limit financial support for civic organizations. This general pattern most certainly pertained to Russia's transition as important and influential Soviet-era organizations such as Democratic Russia fulfilled their mandate when Soviet communism collapsed. These groups and many others were not constituted to articulate and aggregate societal interests or lobby the state. In large measure, they formed to destroy the state. After the revolution, these revolutionary groups disappeared. So too did enthusiasm within the population for participating in social mobilization. Surveys indicate that only a tiny fraction of Russian citizens—8 percent in one survey—participate in nongovernmental organizations.¹³

Russian Civil Society—Compared to What?

How one assesses the weight of these various factors depends in large part on which part of the elephant the analyst is describing and to which animal the elephant is being compared. The Civic Forum that convened in November 2001 is an illuminating example. For those focused mostly on Putin and his antidemocratic policies, the Civic Forum represented another example of the Russian state trying to manage if not nationalize civil society. By contrast, for those worried more about the state's neglect of societal demands, the forum represented progress—a unique opportunity for NGO leaders to meet directly the state officials at the highest levels. Both of these interpretations are represented in the pages of these two issues of *Demokratizatsiya*.

In evaluating these various obstacles to civil society development in Russia, the comparison set is also extremely important. Compared to French or Polish civil society, Russian civil society is underdeveloped. Compared to Belarus or Uzbekistan, the situation in Russia looks rather promising. Compared to the Soviet Union twenty years ago, the current “blossoming” of civil society in Russia looks truly remarkable (although, as Weiler underscores, the actual condition of the common citizen may not have yet benefited from this bloom). Compared to the expectations for Russian civil society a decade ago, however, the results look rather modest.

Our aim in this issue and the next is not to reach a final judgment on the development of Russian civil society over the last decade, nor to predict the future. Our more modest aim is to suggest that serious answers to these questions are more complex than is often assumed in debates about the future of Russian democracy.

NOTES

1. For accounts of this new activity, see Gail W. Lapidus, "State and Society: Toward the Emergence of Civil Society in the Soviet Union," in *Politics, Society, and Nationality: Inside Gorbachev's Russia*, Seweryn Bialer, ed. (Boulder and London: Westview Press, 1989), 121–48; Geoffrey Hosking, *The Awakening of the Soviet Union* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991); M. Steven Fish, "The Emergence of Independent Associations and the Transformation of Russian Political Society," *Journal of Communist Studies* 7, no. 3 (September 1991): 299–334; M. Holt Ruffin et. al., *The Post-Soviet Handbook: A Guide to Grassroots Organizations and Internet Resources* (Seattle and London: Center for Civil Society International and University of Washington Press, 1999); Michael Urban with Vyacheslav Igrunov and Sergei Mitrokhin, *The Rebirth of Politics in Russia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); and Michael McFaul and Sergei Markov., *The Troubled Birth of Russian Democracy: Political Parties, Programs, and Profiles* (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 1993).

2. USAID, *The 1999 NGO Sustainability Index*, available on <www.usaid.gov>.

3. The same occurred in Weimar Germany. See Sheri Berman, "Civil Society and the Collapse of the Weimar Republic," *World Politics* 49, no. 3 (April 1997): 401–30.

4. Carl Friedrich and Zbigniew Brzezinski, *Totalitarian Dictatorship and Autocracy*, (New York: Praeger, 1967).

5. Guillermo O'Donnell and Philippe Schmitter, *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule: Tentative Conclusions*, 4 (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986).

6. Michael McFaul, "State Power, Institutional Change, and the Politics of Privatization in Russia," *World Politics* 47, no. 2 (January 1995): 210–43.

7. David Hoffman, *The Oligarchs: Wealth and Power in the New Russia* (New York: Public Affairs, 2002).

8. Terry Moe, *The Organization of Interests* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980).

9. Larry Diamond, *Developing Democracy: Toward Consolidation* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999); and Juan J. Linz and Alfred Stepan, *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation: Southern Europe, South America, and Post-Communist Europe* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996).

10. On the emergence of these institutions, see Michael McFaul, *Russia's Unfinished Revolution: Political Change from Gorbachev to Putin* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001).

11. Arend Lijphart, "Presidentialism and Majoritarian Democracy: Theoretical Observations," in *The Failure of Presidential Democracy: Comparative Perspectives*, Juan Linz and Arturo Valenzuela, eds. (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994), 91–105.

12. On the stages of development of civil society in post-communist transitions, see Marcie Weigle and Jim Butterfield, "Civil Society in Reforming Communist Regimes," *Comparative Politics* 25, no. 1 (October 1992): 1–23.

13. Colton's 1995–1996 survey produced the eight-percent number. See Timothy Colton, *Transitional Citizens: Voters and What Influences Them in the New Russia* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), chapter two, 28. Using VTsIOM data, Rose reported in 1998 that only 9 percent of Russian citizens participated in a voluntary organization. See Richard Rose, "Getting Things Done with Social Capital: The New Russia Barometer VII," *Studies in Public Policy*, No. 3030 (Glasgow: University of Strathclyde, 1998), 60.