The Kremlin's Civic Forum: Cooperation or Co-optation for Civil Society in Russia?

ALEXANDER NIKITIN AND JANE BUCHANAN

On 20–21 November 2001 the Kremlin hosted the Civic Forum, an unprecedented event that brought some 3,500 representatives of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and members of the Russian government together for a two-day conference involving plenary sessions and roundtable discussions on current issues facing Russia's civil society. The meaning and goals of such a forum were, from the outset, not explicit, and they were throughout the process interpreted variously by governmental and nongovernmental participants and observers. Many—particularly human rights, environmental, and other "oppositional" groups—approached the forum with caution, even antipathy. Many believed that the forum was, at best, little more than President Vladimir Putin's attempt to rally unified societal support for his policies, or, at worst, an effort to draw civil society into governmental structures, consistent with Putin's consolidation of an administrative "vertical" and "dictatorship of the law" in the country. The administration portrayed the event as a gesture toward opening new lines of communication between government and society. Although nothing permanent or binding emerged from two hectic days of meetings, the Civic Forum itself and its formulation nevertheless represent a unique moment in the development of Russian civil society and society-authority relations in Russia.

In this article we begin by describing the process of development leading up to the forum, including the contrasting perspectives of Putin administration representatives and members of the NGO community as well as the extensive debates about the meaning of the forum among NGOs themselves. We then examine the events of the forum and evaluate the outcomes with a view toward long-term implications for relations between the Russian state and civil society. Much of the discussion focuses on the perspectives and experiences of human rights and

Alexander Nikitin is the director of the Russian Coalition for the Environment and Human Rights, in St. Petersburg, Russia. He attended the Civic Forum in November. Jane Buchanan is the Human Rights Watch 2002–03 Michael Bloomberg Fellow. The authors would like to thank the Woodrow Wilson Center's Kennan Institute for Advanced Russian Studies for its generous support of this and other research. The opinions in this article are strictly the authors' and do not reflect the position of any institution.

environmental NGOs, not because they constitute all of Russian civil society or even the vast majority of it, but rather because for these groups the very idea and realization of a Civic Forum entailed the greatest dilemmas and greatest potential impact.

Origins of the Civic Forum

The ultimate structure and stated goals of the Civic Forum evolved extensively over a six-month period starting in June 2001. A Kremlin-sponsored meeting on 12 June between ten civic leaders, President Putin, and a handful of administration representatives marked the initial formal discussion of an attempt to increase interaction between the first (governmental) and third (nongovernmental, noncommercial) sectors through the creation of an all-Russian Civic Forum. The masterminds of the meeting and much of the process that followed included two well-known Kremlin technocrats: Gleb Pavlovsky, Putin adviser and director of the Fund for Effective Policy, and Viacheslav Surkov, deputy head of the Presidential Administration, known as a "PR manager supreme" and architect of the merger between the Unity and Fatherland Parties.[1] These original organizers envisioned the establishment of a "Union of Civic Organizations" or another permanent organ through which civil society representatives would communicate with federal authorities. In an address after the 12 June meeting, NGO representatives of the initial organizing meeting called for a Civic Forum to contribute to the realization of a "Great Russia" founded on the "best national traditions of service to society." Accordingly, "free citizens in close union with the government will be able to establish an order in which personal initiatives are not degraded and each individual realizes his own potential."[2] Pavlovsky's Fund for Effective Policy colleagues later described the ideal structure as a "permanent, inspired, and mutually beneficial dialogue with the Administration," which would "bring the restoration of faith in the country's governmental authority and ensure a two-way link between government and society."[3]

From the beginning many approached the concept of the forum with profound skepticism, even cynicism. Some interpreted the Putin administration's sudden interest in civil society as merely a response to Boris Berezovsky's and other oligarchs' provision of funds to human rights and other nongovernmental organizations in a supposed attempt to encourage opposition to Putin. Perhaps the ongoing battles between the Kremlin and the powerful Russian businessmen had simply taken yet another turn, with the competitors now vying for influence and cooperation with nongovernmental organizations to bolster their own political clout.[4]

For others, the early development of the Civil Forum simply recalled too closely Soviet preparations for Communist Party Congresses, whose attendance would be limited to reliable delegates and regional delegations hand-picked by Kremlin and local government structures. The handful of attendees, theoretically acting on behalf of more than 350,000 NGOs registered by the Russian Ministry of Justice, could be expected to vote on the formation of a permanent government-to-civil-society communication body. As such, any kind of mechanism to organize civil society could be little more than what human rights activist and chair of the

Moscow-Helsinki Group Ludmila Alekseeva described as a most obvious attempt to manipulate democracy and organize civil society into hierarchical structures to support the current administration.[5]

In addition to the highly questionable structural and ideological underpinnings of the original vision of the Civic Forum, experienced NGOs recognized the sudden proliferation of pseudo- or wholly government-organized "nongovernmental" organizations (GONGOs) formed under the auspices of the Kremlin. One such organization, named, with no small irony, *Grazhdanskoe Obshchestvo* (Civil Society), diligently undertook the task of helping to select Civic Forum participants from across Russia. *Grazhdanskoe Obshchestvo* and similar "scarecrow" organizations shared the same loyal spirit and progovernment purpose as *Zeleny Krest* (Green Cross) and *KEDR* (Constructive Ecological Movement of Russia), which the government formed in 2000 in response to the environmental movement's attempt to initiate a public referendum on the importation of spent nuclear fuel.[6] These institutions have been used to demonstrate "unity" of opinion on policy between the administration and the public, for the government's projection both on the international stage and vis-à-vis the media.[7] Altogether, through the creation of pseudo-NGOs and the selective invitation of pro-Kremlin civic representatives for both the initial discussions and the proposed event itself, the administration's strategy seemed to involve consolidation of a cadre of loyal NGOs that could ultimately outmaneuver more problematic opposition and activist groups on both the domestic and the international scene. NGOs and civic leaders would then be neatly divided into two camps: "trustworthy" and "uncooperative," with the latter potentially marginalized into obscurity over time.

Ideological and Structural Transformations

Many of the largest, best-known, and most experienced nongovernmental organizations, including *Narodnaia Assembleia* (People's Assembly), an informal grouping of several established organizations such as the Moscow-Helsinki Group, Memorial, the Social Ecological Union, the Confederation of Consumer Societies, and others, had not been invited to participate in the organizing committee and categorically refused to support the Kremlin's project.[8] Aware of increasingly widespread negative publicity and a conspicuous lack of support from truly influential and internationally respected NGOs, the Kremlin began to change its approach. The organizers came to understand that the absence of human rights, environmental, and other activist groups at the forum could generate a split in society, encourage further critical commentary from the domestic and foreign press, and possibly even inspire negative reactions from the West. Thus, on 20 August, Deputy Head of the Presidential Administration Surkov and others arrived at the Moscow office of Memorial to meet with numerous NGO leaders to hear out the conditions under which the organizations would participate in the development and realization of the forum.

Those willing to consider participation in the Kremlin's project demanded numerous changes in the ideological and structural formulation of the forum.

Namely, they required that the event not serve as a congress for plenipotentiary representatives, but that it be reconfigured as a working gathering for NGO activists interested in some degree of cooperation with the government to jointly solve pressing social problems. The work of the forum would represent not people, but ideas. It would not involve any manner of elections, nor be limited to a large plenary session of select delegations and government officials, but would include a variety of roundtable discussions to incorporate a broad range of participants and topics.

Another key aspect of the transformation of the Civic Forum into an event more acceptable to a wider range of interests entailed restructuring the Organizing Committee to encompass a variety of societal representation. Members of the original, functioning Organizing Committee were to constitute only one-third of the new committee. The remaining positions were to be delegated so that one-third would be representatives of previously uninvited human rights and environmental organizations, with the final third composed of members of the Presidential Administration. That last point was particularly important, as NGO support for the project depended on direct contact with representatives of the administration, rather than communication through any sort of intermediaries, including Kremlin technocrats. Ultimately, the administration was obliged to agree to those conditions, having involved itself sufficiently to make reconsideration of the forum at that point impossible.

"For some there was no escaping the belief that as a Kremlin-sponsored initiative, the forum would per se serve as a means to further the ends of the authorities."

Thus began, in mid-September, the second stage of preparations for the Civic Forum, with Moscow-Helsinki Group chair Ludmila Alekseeva, Memorial co-director Semion Roginsky, Socio-Ecological Union codirector Svetoslav Zabelin, and numerous other influential human rights and environmental activists now serving on an eighty-one-member organizing committee.[9] Many saw the redesign of the forum structure and planning as a victory in itself for civil society insofar as NGO leaders boldly reshaped the project to provide for more equality and civic leadership. Nevertheless, opinions on the scale and meaning of the changes varied widely, even within the Organizing Committee itself. In an interview in mid-September, political scientist Sergei Markov, director of the Institute for Political Research and member of the original Pavlovsky Organizing Committee, insisted that the committee's newcomers "supported *all* of the basic ideas of the construction of the Forum" (emphasis added). Furthermore, the reluctant had finally been "convinced of the Executive's sufficiently sincere offer of cooperation and of the impossibility of manipulation through [the Forum] process."[10] *Narodnaia Assembleia* and others, however, remained skeptical, still unconvinced that the "Administration did not intend to use the Forum for some kind of elections"

or other ends, and they were thus prepared to walk out in the event of circumstances designed to compromise them.[11]

In spite of the ideological differences within the group, the reconfigured Organizing Committee proved to be quite functional, demonstrating its pragmatism by rapidly formulating a working group of twenty-one Organizing Committee members, with Markov serving as chair. In early October the working group initiated the new spirit of the forum by sending an open letter to the NGO community describing the revised forum goals and plans, inviting input, and requesting participation in the forum from all interested parties.[12] In addition, on 12 October, the Organizing Committee published a two-page statement, "On the Goals and Tasks of the Civic Forum," that established the framework for all further Civic Forum developments.

The statement briefly described the current status of civil society and the work of NGOs, detailed the most pressing governmental and societal reform issues, and expressed the fundamental goal of the Civic Forum to be "a working discussion on the development path of Russian civil society and its interaction with the government."[13] It also reiterated the forum's political neutrality and precluded the possibility of establishment of a parliament, ministry, or any other organ that would aim to speak on behalf of the many and varied interests of the NGO community, emphasizing an open and horizontal civic system utterly independent of the governmental vertical. More specifically, the committee defined the relationship between the first and third sectors by stating, "Civil society is not a vassal of the authorities, just as it is not an opponent of them. It exists as a natural and equal partner of the government in the creation of a strong and prosperous state. And effective government similarly exists as a natural partner of civil society and its daily activities."[14]

Arseny Roginsky, chair of Memorial, described the statement, signed by both civic and governmental representatives, as "a historic event" and "infinitely important."[15] The brief but weighty document reflects the organizers' resolve to direct the forum based on absolutely balanced interactions between all civic participants and governmental authorities. With its release, a profound ideological reformulation occurred with respect to the forum and the position of civil society more generally: the NGO community refused to accept a position as a junior partner or be held hostage to Kremlin politicking.

Competing NGO Perspectives on Forum Participation

In spite of the changes to the structure and philosophy of the Civic Forum, not all shared in the optimism of the moment and the transformations brought about by increased NGO leadership. Thus, concurrent with preparations for the forum, heated, even polemical, and frequently public debates took place among nongovernmental organizations, particularly human rights and environmental groups, over the acceptability of engaging in any part of the process. Positions ranged from those who were opposed to the very idea of NGOs, by nature and by definition independent of the government, not engaging with the administration at all, to those who believed the particular format of the forum to be unacceptable, see-

ing it as merely a means to meet the ends of administration officials or Putin himself. Some of the more outspoken opponents to participation in the forum included Lev Ponomarev, director of the all-Russian movement "For Human Rights"; Elena Bonner, chair of the Andrei Sakharov Foundation; Father Gleb Yakunin, dissident Russian Orthodox priest and human rights leader; Alexei Yablokov, president of the Center for Ecological Policy; and Federal Duma Deputies Sergei Yusenkov and Yuli Rybakov. Several human rights and environmental groups from Murmansk, Novosibirsk, and Cheliabinsk also refused their support.

Much of the skepticism about the sincerity of the administration's project endured throughout the forum's development irrespective of the changes to the Organizing Committee made in September. For some there was no escaping the belief that as a Kremlin-sponsored initiative, the forum would per se serve as a means to further the ends of the authorities. Perhaps Putin intended to increase control over the third sector to counter the growing civic influence of oligarchs such as Berezovsky. Or perhaps the self-proclaimed "people's president" (*narodny president*) sought ways to further enhance pro-government public opinion by encouraging and co-opting loyal groups into administrative structures while relegating oppositional organizations to obscurity.

A more nuanced perspective suggested that danger existed not because Putin was actively constructing a civil society in support of his policies, but rather because he sought to use the forum as part of a larger strategy to maneuver Russia into international and European structures. Acceptance as a full member in these clubs is ostensibly premised on Russia's capacity to support stable democracy, most fully revealed by the presence of a flourishing civil society.[16] And what better means to inspire Western approval of Russian democracy and the institutional benefits and investment that might follow than to showcase the country's NGOs in a Kremlin palace parade? Still others considered the Civic Forum to be less about Putin's agenda than the wishes of his court technocrats "to show the throne their importance." "Yesterday they fake a parliamentary crisis; today they prepare to demonstrate the moral-political unity of human rights advocates and the Kremlin."[17]

Those opposed to participation on principle approached the problems of the Civic Forum from the perspective that civil society is by definition wholly autonomous from the government. Therefore, the principles of NGOs working to fulfill a mandate of government oversight placed limits on the acceptability of their engagement with the authorities. Government cooperation that is possible or acceptable for veterans groups, "beekeepers, or stamp collectors"[18] may be problematic for groups whose object is to defend the rights and freedoms of citizens against violations by the government or its representatives. Thus, many chose not to participate in the forum or any other manner of government cooperation for fear of being drawn into some form of corporatist relationship requiring compromise, sacrifice of the purity of their methods, and loss of hard-won autonomy.

Slightly more adamant in their refusal to accept the Kremlin's invitations were those for whom the policies and actions of the current administration precluded conversation. Many expressed unwillingness to sit at the same negotiating table

with a government that wages criminal war and widely abuses human rights in Chechnya, that ignores public protests against the importation of nuclear fuel and the liquidation of state environmental agencies, and that sentences journalists, environmentalists, and academics to prison. Quite simply, for many, there is "nothing to say" to such an administration.[19]

Finally, there were those who believed in the possibility of dialogue but believed that the initiative for such a course must come from civil society representatives themselves, not from government. In a constructive expression of this position, a group of NGO leaders and other activists, including Lev Ponomarev, Yu. V. Samodurov of the Andrei Sakharov Museum, Federal Duma Deputy S. I. Yushenkov, and others, established the "Permanent Roundtable: 'Civil Society and the State.'" In an address to human rights and nongovernmental organizations in early November, the group's organizing committee stated its view that participation of human rights groups in the forum was "a mistake," although seeking cooperation with state authorities should not be precluded per se. For "honest professionals, committed to the rule of law and the advancement of democracy," governmental bodies and structures can act as willing and able partners.[20] For the roundtable members, the format for such cooperation simply could not be established from above, as the forum had been, but had to be initiated from the grassroots level to be legitimate and in the true interest of civil society. They also expressed their belief that the debate on the forum emerged from these differing positions on how best to express society's positions vis-à-vis the government, rather than from a more fundamental rift in the human rights movement itself.[21]

"The forum would allow for 'discussion of pressing problems that the government cannot resolve without society and society cannot resolve without government.'"

For those several thousand who offered support for the Civic Forum, there was a belief that the changes in the forum's concept and Organizing Committee were sufficient to guarantee that NGOs would not simply be swept into the administrative hierarchy, but would have at least the possibility for constructive work. According to Ludmila Alekseeva, the forum would allow for "discussion of pressing problems that the government cannot resolve without society and society cannot resolve without government."[22] The government may carry out inappropriate, unpopular, or even illegal actions and policies, yet that government is elected and legitimate, and thus interaction in such a venue as the forum might provide one means to influence policies. Furthermore, the forum might "open the government's eyes to the positive activities of civic organizations," according to Internews representative Manana Aslamazian.[23] A related perspective focused on the possibility of there being greater risks to remaining outside of the process than engaging in it. Without participating, "a significant number of regionally active

noncommercial organizations would be left overboard" and ignored, their noninvolvement understood as passivity or insecurity.[24] Many echoed that sentiment with a feeling of "We don't want to participate, but we can't *not* participate."

Alternatively, participants might be able to use the forum in some constructive manner by "playing their own game on another's field" rather than being pawns in a Kremlin game. Memorial representatives took an even more constructive position: to avoid the feeling of playing someone else's game on someone else's principles, NGOs should formulate principles and positions that they would not allow to be violated and that would sustain them in their participation in all aspects of the forum.[25] These and other debates continued over the months preceding the conference, revealing a profound level of introspection on the part of civil society activists and presenting a complex backdrop to the organization and preparation of the forum.

The Second Stage of Forum Preparation

With its final consolidation occurring only in late September, the Organizing Committee faced the massive project of arranging a conference for several thousand NGO leaders and government officials in just two months. Fairness and transparency were paramount to all activities, making one of the first tasks the design of an acceptable system for selecting participants. Five thousand participant slots were to be apportioned as follows: three thousand representatives of civic organizations (limited to one participant per organization); three hundred representatives of all-Russian and international organizations registered in Russia; seven hundred "working group quota" participants; and one thousand guests and reserves, including government officials, journalists, and international observers. Given the large number of registered NGOs from eighty-nine federal subjects, a quota system was established with participant places distributed by region, based on formulas considering both population and level of civic activity. Civic organizations from each region were themselves expected to arrange local organizing committees by mid-October and to undertake a preforum conference that would allow for initial discussion of problems, tasks, and solutions relevant to local civil society organizations.[26] The regional committees were also to distribute application materials for Civic Forum participation and then collect completed forms and forward them to the working group of the central Organizing Committee in Moscow. On the basis of those applications, about 60–80 percent of the regional quotas were to be filled, with the remaining slots allocated through applications sent by regional or all-Russian organizations directly to the main Organizing Committee.[27]

Although the majority of regional groups successfully organized along these guidelines, Moscow, with over nineteen thousand organizations, was exempt from the regional requirements and subject to different procedures. In addition, about thirty other regions failed to sponsor conferences, either because "the extreme zeal of the governors frightened all interested parties" or because local civic life proved to be too sluggish to mobilize.[28] Thus, although the quota system followed an expert formula, the level of commitment proved hard to measure, with some

regions not filling their quota and others having an overabundance of interested participants.[29] In addition to the regional conferences, some groups organized pre-forum conferences in late October and early November on specific themes. Veterans' organizations and *Zeleny krest* held roundtable meetings, and the group *Grazhdanskoe obshchestvo* organized a conference, "On the Road to the Civic Forum." Larger-scale events included *Narodny Assableia's* second conference in Moscow, and the all-Russian Human Rights Conference in Sochi, where 318 NGOs gathered to discuss the forum and future cooperation within the movement.[30]

The Civic Forum worked with a federally sponsored budget of $1.5 million, although the Organizing Committee also expressed its hope that "foreign supporters" would make possible the participation of many more individuals than the allotted finances could support.[31] The budget and expenditures were made public,[32] consistent with the reformed Organizing Committee's demand that the forum function with the utmost transparency and democracy. In the same spirit, the Organizing Committee also encouraged involvement from as many individuals and organizations as possible, particularly from those who would not be present in Moscow, since only about 1 percent of all registered organizations would actually be represented at the forum. In addition to gathering information from application materials, a week before the opening of the forum Gleb Pavlovsky distributed a letter and questionnaire to all participants and nonparticipants on behalf of the Organizing Committee, requesting responses to help in the formulation of the forum's agenda.[33]

The Organizing Committee's working group managed the immense logistical arrangements and details relatively efficiently given the very limited time frame. Yet in spite of reasonable organizing success, many felt that the preparation time had been insufficient, too few individuals and organizations were aware of the forum, and programs had not been fully developed, so that by early November there were calls for the forum to be delayed by a few weeks. Some felt that there would also be a significant symbolic meaning for the Civic Forum to begin on 10 December, International Human Rights Day, and end on 12 December, Russian Constitution Day.[34] The logistical difficulties in changing the schedule, however, proved to be too great, and the forum was held, as scheduled, on 21–22 November, with ultimately neither the organizers, nor the authorities, nor the media, nor the participants fully prepared for what was to take place.

The Civic Forum: Form Versus Substance

The Civic Forum opened officially with a plenary session held in the Great Kremlin Palace and attended by the majority of forum participants. Keynote speaker and session chair Ludmila Alekseeva, who had been exiled in the Soviet era for her dissident activities, first brought the participants' attention to the fact that they gathered in a hall formerly home to Communist Party Congresses. She then stated categorically that this forum shared nothing in common with such perfunctory political shows, at which hand-picked delegates voted in support of presidium decisions on behalf of the entire population. Therefore, as agreed during the restructuring, the forum would not include an elite presidium, any elections, any

resolutions, or any general declarations. For the same reason, the working group had in advance decided that no "portraits, songs, or melodies recalling association with official events of the Soviet period" should be used.[35] The Russian Federation hymn also would not be played at the opening, as it retained the melody of the Soviet hymn and would divide the hall between those who would stand in support of it and those who would not.[36] Having distanced the current forum from past precedents, Alekseeva turned her words toward the present and the future of the citizens and civil society of a now democratic Russia. She detailed the wide variety and scope of work of Russian NGOs but noted the large rift that remains between civil society and governmental authority, which necessitates constructive efforts both at the forum and beyond it to create a dialogue to resolve sociopolitical and economic problems.[37]

"Putin stated . . . that civic organizations have varied goals and interests and should remain independent and free."

Alekseeva's short remarks concluded with her introduction of President Putin, who had entered the room to see all participants standing, although not all applauded him. That Putin's remarks followed Alekseeva's introduction and that the president would then sit next to the former dissident symbolized that indeed profound changes in Russia were under way, despite continuing suspicion between government and citizens. In his speech, the president spoke supportively of the cooperation between the administration and nongovernmental representatives in preparing the forum and denied any attempt on the part of the government or its officials to co-opt or control civil society. Putin further stated his belief that it is "absolutely unproductive, and, in principle, impossible and indeed dangerous to attempt to construct civil society 'from above.'"[38] He continued, recognizing that civic organizations have varied goals and interests and should remain independent and free. Thus, in his mind, the state's role is to formulate favorable conditions for the development of a still-underdeveloped civil society and promote productive dialogue between the first and the third sectors. To this end, he said, "We recognize that the efficacy of this dialogue to a considerable degree depends on us, on representatives of the state, on the state as a whole. In this, we are prepared to take necessary organizational, and, if needed, legal measures, and are prepared to develop effective two-way communication between society and state apparatuses."[39]

The speech proceeded with much the same spirit of pragmatic optimism about the future and the need for "calm, concentrated, systematic work" to realize the most from the great "chance" before them to "unite the resources of a strengthened state and the energy of a democratic society."[40] Consistent with his public appearances in general, Putin's speech was fitting for the event and revealed a command of the language and terminology necessary and appropriate for communication with this particular audience. He also remained true to his portrayal

of himself as a pragmatist and a realist working in the best interest of Russia and Russians. Yet for many who heard him speak, Putin's very consistency in this regard is at the heart of the most murky and problematic developments in Russia: what the president says so eloquently very often fails to correspond with events as they actually occur.

Thanking the attendees, the president took his seat next to Alekseeva and listened while Duma Speaker Genady Seleznev, Duma Deputy Ella Pamfilova, Gleb Pavlovsky, Constitutional Court Chairman Marat Baglai, and Chairman of the Confederation of Consumer's Societies Alexander Auzan, offered their remarks. As he listened, the president was obliged to read a flood of notes that had made their way to the stage from the attendees in the hall and been passed to him by Alekseeva.[41] After Auzan's speech, the president excused himself, citing much routine work to be done (but promising to read the notes in due course), and departed, having heard only the statements of those people with whom he meets virtually every day. In the planning stages of the forum, Alekseeva had insisted that the Organizing Committee determine the order of the plenary session speakers, but the president's protocol service required that after the president, official state representatives would speak, to be followed by representatives of civic organizations. Therefore, the president heard very little if anything that he had not heard before and was promptly followed off stage by the remaining high officials. These actions very much gave the impression that not only was the forum not a priority for the president, but that those surrounding Putin arranged the schedule so that he would remain insulated from information or situations that might have proved unpleasant for him.

Following the two-hour plenary session, participants spent the remainder of the two days engaged in twenty-one thematic discussions and more than seventy roundtable meetings on various topics, including national security and foreign policy, domestic policy, social policy, military reform, education, legal and judicial systems, mass media and freedom of information, public health and the environment, citizen oversight, Chechnya, youth, women's issues, volunteerism, immigration policy, and refugees, among others.[42] The goal of the first day's activities entailed discussion and preparation of positions or statements that would then serve as the basis for the second day's conversations with the representatives of the government. By the end of the second day, the Organizing Committee hoped to receive reports from each of the groups on the results of those discussions.

With the exception of some minor agreements, ultimately even the roundtable format did not produce concrete outcomes for a variety of reasons. With representatives from three thousand regional NGOs and nearly five hundred national NGOs, the participant numbers in each discussion were so large that even the relatively smaller groups hardly served as ideal formats for discussion. And with the events taking place often at great distances from each other throughout Moscow, it proved to be physically impossible for the participants to join more than one discussion, even though they were expected to coordinate with "like-minded" colleagues to present particular positions in a variety of venues.[43] Furthermore,

department and ministry heads were rarely present at the roundtables, with only minor officials in many cases appearing, seemingly only to fulfill the responsibilities of a day's work.

A few examples of the more controversial issues discussed at the forum illustrate the limited outcomes of the meetings and roundtables conducted in this relatively unfavorable atmosphere. The report from the "Public Health and Environment" sessions stated that the three hundred discussion group attendees managed to outline the major problems in these areas and then engaged in discussions with various ministries. With respect to the realization of the "Environmental Doctrine of Russia," a document drafted by environmental groups at the request of President Putin and approved at the National Ecological Forum in September 2001, NGO representatives and the Ministry of Economic Development and Trade agreed to sign in the near future an agreement on cooperation. Roundtable discussions with the Ministry of Atomic Energy led to agreement on the formation of two joint working groups: one on environmental problems related to the activities of the nuclear complex and the second on issues connected with chemical weapons disarmament. Similarly, work with the Ministry of Public Health resulted in a decision to form joint working groups on psychological rehabilitation and ensuring food safety for the population.

Participants in those sessions also raised questions on the proposed reforms to legislation on referenda, the need for environmental law reform and increased access to information, the problems of defense development at the expense of the environment, and so on, but achieved no commitments or agreements on the topics. The directors of two important bodies central to many of these issues, the Russian Aviation and Space Agency and the environmental division of the Ministry of Defense, were not present. Furthermore, other controversial and pressing environmental issues, including the creation of an independent federal body on environmental protection and safety, did not receive any attention whatsoever.[44]

In other venues, Grigory Pasko, an Amnesty International prisoner of conscience charged with espionage in one of several Federal Security Service trials against investigative journalists, commented on his observations during two roundtable discussions on freedom of information and mass media.[45] Without any hint of sarcasm, Pasko stated his impression that "dialogue with the authorities will not be a simple, and, at times, even a torturous process."[46] An even greater sense of the divide between the government and citizen representatives appeared in the highly charged discussions of Chechnya, leading to a virtual breakdown of communication. According to a *Moskovsky komsomolets* article following the forum's completion, during one session:

> Citizens threw out masses of horrifying facts about the Chechen war, which the officials countered by explaining that not everything was that horrible. As a result, citizens accuse the authorities of lying and distorting the facts, and the officials accuse citizens of "not understanding the moment" and of unconstructive approaches. . . . It went to the point of one official describing the discussion as a "Nuremberg trial" against the authorities.[47]

For human rights groups such as Memorial and the Committee of Soldiers' Mothers, the opportunity to discuss such painful and urgent problems face to face with the Ministry of Defense held the potential for constructive, progressive dialogue. Unfortunately, however, the forum roundtable merely confirmed the depth of suspicion and frustration on both sides, with the only minor victory being an agreement to form another joint commission on Chechnya.

It should be said that the results of talks on the highly divisive issues of environment, access to information, and Chechnya are not necessarily representative of the outcomes of all forum discussions and roundtables. Meetings on local government and other topics proved to be more productive, and Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov and Security Council Secretary Vladimir Rushailo attended the discussion "National Security, Foreign Policy, and Civil Society," adding significant political presence at least to those talks.[48] Nevertheless, the fruitless or absent communication on difficult themes involving traditionally oppositional NGOs ultimately reflected the challenges to bridging the rift between civil society and government, of which Alekseeva spoke at the forum opening. Although most NGOs, after much debate and self-evaluation, approached the forum with some hope of dialogue, albeit without compromise on mandates or principles, it remained unclear whether the government was similarly willing to participate in the search for common ground and resolution on general societal issues.

At the closing plenary session, which President Putin did not attend, Prime Minister Mikhail Kasianov represented the government and Deputy Prime Minister Valentina Matvienko served as meeting chair. Twenty-one presenters offered brief summaries of the basic positions and results of the thematic discussions and roundtables of the preceding two days. The closing events offered generally positive and relatively benign commentary about the meetings and successes of the work of the forum and its participants. But perhaps events occurring several weeks after the forum's close reveal more about the degree of genuine dialogue between government and civil society that occurred: When, at the closing session, Grigory Pasko spoke about the importance of freedom of information and independent media, the entire audience, including Prime Minister Kasianov, applauded his bold and honest words, suggesting to many that there would finally be a positive outcome in the case against Pasko, with the authorities now realizing the absurdity of the charges. Yet only a month later, the former navy captain and journalist was convicted of high treason and sentenced to four years in a hard labor prison. For journalists, environmentalists, scientists, human rights advocates, and others, the results of the Pasko case deliver a much clearer message about the actual relationship between government and its citizens than any speech delivered during the two days of the Civic Forum.

Evaluating the Forum: Perspectives on the Future for Russian Civil Society

Given the disheartening developments in the Pasko case and continuing government obstacles to civil society's realization of its full rights, how can the Civic Forum be understood in the broader context of Russian society-authority rela-

tions? First and foremost, few would disagree that very little of a purely practical nature was achieved in the two chaotic days of forum activities. The two-month preparation period was too short to organize properly an event on this scale, and the brief days of meetings could permit little more than superficial discussion of dozens of topics engendering hundreds of opinions. Whether this outcome should be considered positive or negative most certainly depends on one's perspective. For Ludmila Alekseeva, even well before the actual events, the position was clear: "The result will be positive, if there will be no results at all."[49] The results that Alekseeva and many feared, but managed to escape, included, above all, the construction of any governmental structure designed to incorporate non-governmental institutions into the state hierarchy.

"Putin says that he believes that 'civil society should feed on the spirit of freedom,' yet virtually no independent Russian media sources remain, and journalists are persecuted for their work."

If civil society avoided the worst, much of the course of the forum nevertheless confirmed, or at least failed to erase, other suspicions. Many questions remain as to the real goals and tactics of President Putin. Although he states the impossibility of constructing civil society from above, the government continues to support a cadre of loyal, easily manipulated pseudo-NGOs that disrupt the work of genuinely grassroots organizations created under citizen initiative. Putin says that he believes that "civil society should feed on the spirit of freedom," yet virtually no independent Russian media sources remain, and journalists are persecuted for their work.[50] Putin insists that the government should do everything to create a favorable climate for civil society development, but ministries closest to those issues disappear and regulations on NGO registration are applied arbitrarily, making representation of interests and simple survival a struggle for many organizations.

Debates continue as to whether these circumstances arise because the president uses cover-up or disinformation tactics consistent with his security service background or whether he is truly sincere and is confounded by the agendas of his officials. The Civic Forum itself provided little additional insight into or resolution of these questions, and in this atmosphere very few interactions resulted in agreement or constructive decisions on means for continuing communication. At the end of the events, most NGOs returned to their daily work no more convinced of government readiness or willingness to engage civil society on equal or meaningful terms. That sentiment is consistent with the general perceptions of government held by the Russian public. In a Russian Center for Public Opinion and Market Research poll, 92 percent of citizens believed that government officials "attempt to utilize their positions and to gain some advantages," and 86 percent agreed with the statement, "People in positions of authority in a country absolutely don't care what happens to the citizens of that country."[51]

Beyond the government-society divide reflected in the spirit and activities of the forum, another dimension of the process proved troubling to many in the NGO community: the divisions that emerged in debates over the validity or necessity of participating in the government-sponsored event. Many consider that the relative underdevelopment of Russian civil society and the particular obstacles that NGOs face in an environment in which state regulation is strong, but arbitrary and corrupt, require that organizations strive for the greatest degree of unity and cooperation in the name of consolidation of the sector. Indeed, many considered it quite possible that the government sought to exploit the forum through divide-and-conquer tactics that would play organizations off one another or distract them from their main efforts in an attempt to weaken the civil sector as a whole. As a result, organizations working within the same sphere, including environmental and human rights groups, made frequent and vocal calls for unity of purpose beyond any disagreements over the forum.[52] However, given that the forum outcomes reveal that traditionally oppositional organizations are not suddenly willing to be drawn into closer partnership with the government, the possibility of a serious or lasting rift between participant and nonparticipant organizations seems limited.

The Civic Forum may yet prove beneficial to civil society in more subtle ways and in ways that most genuinely foster its strengthening and maturation. At the most practical level, some small steps toward realizing some of the goals for the future set out at the forum are materializing. In early February the government finally released the results of the forum in the form of twenty-six "public recommendations," which included further debureaucratization, greater governmental transparency, and the establishment of nongovernmental-governmental cooperation committees. It remains to be seen how fully the government and civil society actors intend to cooperate to realize those goals, but the publication is yet another step in an ongoing process. A more concrete development in response to Civic Forum proposals and expert working committees involved the changes made at the beginning of the year to the Federal Tax Code, which should result in tax savings of some $20–30 million for noncommercial organizations.[53]

On another level, the Kremlin's project to approach the third sector inspired an exceptional level of contemplation and conversation on civil society, its definition, its development, and its very existence in Russia. The media produced an unprecedented number of articles related to civil society and the work of Russian NGOs.[54] NGOs and civil society leaders were forced to evaluate their particular positions vis-à-vis the government and to interact with each other in new ways on local, regional, and national levels. Moreover, the ongoing debates encouraged assessment and introspection that resulted in reaffirmation and articulation of principles and programs, processes all critical to the maintenance of a dynamic nongovernmental sector. For civil society is not simply independent of government hierarchy in a structural sense, but it thrives on the presence of individual opinions and perspectives, each one valid in and of itself, not subject to any consensus. Just as Russian NGOs, facing the threat of being incorporated into a governmental vertical, insisted on the maintenance and growth of a vibrant horizon-

tal network, so too should the diversity of opinions and ideas be seen as fundamental to the proper realization of an open society.

To be sure, the current atmosphere of government-society relations suggests continuing struggles in coming years for Russian civil society, as the state continues to wage war, increase secrecy, and perpetuate unpredictability. Yet, at various levels, NGOs may gain from having brought forth their concerns to this government that, for whatever reason, proposed a new form of dialogue with its citizens. More important, in the long run, civil society may be enriched for having been through the processes of introspection, debate, and deliberation generated by the Kremlin's Civic Forum. These dynamic interactions reveal the presence of an emboldened third sector that both refuses to surrender to the will of the government and supports a diverse and vibrant sphere of activities and attitudes. As such, Russian civil society, which, in the words of Vladimir Putin, "should feed on the spirit of freedom," has the potential not only to avoid starvation in the short term, but to grow into the animated societal organism that is imperative for Russia's democratic consolidation.

NOTES

1. "Vladislav Surkov: Key Player Behind the Scenes," *RFE/RL Russian Political Weekly* 1, no. 13 (1 May 2001).

2. "Souz grazhdan i gosudarstva- dlia protsvetanya svobodnoi rossy (obrashenie gruppy predstavitelei grazhdanskikh souzov i obedeineny-uchastnikov vstrechi s prezidentom RF V.V. Putinym 12 iunia 2001 g.) (Union of citizens and government—for the development of a free Russia [announcement by the group of representatives of citizens unions and the association of participants of the meeting with Russian President V. V. Putin on 12 June 2001]), 2, <http://www.civilforum.ru/work/15.html>. Translations here and throughout are by the authors.

3. "Fund Effektivnoi politiku" (Fund for effective policy), press conference, Nizhny Novgorod, 14 September 2001.

4. See Alexander Arkhangel'sky, "Grazhdane, nachal'niki, i Forum" (Citizens, bosses, and the forum), *Izvestiya*, 11 November 2001; Andrei Kolesnikov, "Pramoe popadanie v trety sektor" (Direct hit to the third sector), *Novoe vremia*, 31 October 2001; and, on the phenomenon of Russian philanthropy, "The Road to Recognition," *Financial Times*, 6–7 April 2001.

5. Ludmila Alekseeva, "Sovmestnaia pozitsya" (Joint position), *Indeks/dos'e na tsenzuru* (Index/dossier on censorship) 16 (2001): 119.

6. In summer 2000, environmental groups took less than three months to gather 2.5 million signatures in an attempt to exercise their constitutional right to a national referendum on the importation of spent nuclear fuel. The Central Election Committee, however, disqualified just enough signatures to preclude a referendum. As of this writing, the Federal Duma has proposed legislative changes that would make it virtually impossible for citizens to initiate a campaign of this sort in support of a referendum.

7. Askhat Kayumov, "Protivopolozhnie protsessy" (Contradictory processes), *Indeks/dos'e na tsenzuru* (Index/dossier on censorship) 16 (2001): 86.

8. Alexander Auzan, chairman of the Confederation of Consumer Societies, had been invited to the original organizing committee. He refused to take part because no other *Narodnaia Assembleia* representatives had been invited. Dmitri Pinsker, "Kremlin Tames Civil Society," *Russia Journal*, 16–22 November 2001, from Johnson's Russia List, 17 November 2001.

9. There were twenty-seven members from each "side": the old committee, newly

invited NGOs, and the government. For a complete list of participants and documents, see <http://www.civilforum.ru/committee/>.

10. Sergei Markov, interview with *Polit.ru* correspondent Kiril Ragov, "Odeialo obshchstveny pol'zi" (Blanket of social benefit), Moscow, 18 September 2001, <http://www.civilforum.ru/media/163.html>. In the same interview Markov stated that "[t]he government should not simply watch the formulation of civil society, it should actively help in its development. . . . The Kremlin took control of the federal television stations. . . . Why does it need them? Exactly in order to develop civil society."

11. Alekseeva, "Sovmestnaia pozitsya," 120.

12. For details see "Pis'mo rabochoi gruppy orgkomiteta grazhdanskogo foruma negosudarstvennym nekomercheskim organizatsyam" (Letter from the Civic Forum Organizing Committee working group to noncommercial organizations), Moscow, 4 October 2001, <http://www.civilforum.ru/work/231.html>.

13. "Zaiavlenie orgkomiteta grazhdanskogo foruma 'O tseliakh i zadachakh grazhdanskogo foruma'" (Statement of the Civic Forum Organizing Committee "On the goals and tasks of the civic forum"), Moscow, 12 October 2001.

14. Ibid., 2.

15. Arseny Roginsky, "Chto nam udalos" (How we have succeeded), presentation at the Second People's Assembly Conference, Moscow, 3 November 2001.

16. Fedor Pogodin, "Grazhdanskoe obshchestvo s russkoi dushoi" (Civil society with a Russian soul), *Indeks/dos'e na tsenzuru* (Index/dossier on censorship) 16 (2001): 18.

17. Lev Ponomarev, "Kto v Forume zhivet" (Who lives in the Forum), *Obshchaya gazeta*, 25 October 2001.

18. These groups, by virtue of their assumed political neutrality, were frequently cited in articles and discussions as prime examples of the kinds of groups that could participate in the forum or other government-sponsored activities with few, if any, philosophical dilemmas. See Alexander Auzan, "Proizvoditeli uslovy zhizni: grazhdanskie organizatsii—rezerv naseleniya, a ne vlasti" (Producers of the conditions of life: Citizen organizations—resource of the people, not of authority), *Izvestiya*, 12 November 2001.

19. Galina Horeva, letter posted to "Rassylka SoES" (Socio-Ecological Union Distribution list), 1 November 2001, <seu_discuss@ecoline.ru>.

20. "Obrashchenie Orgkomiteta Postoiannogo Kruglogo stola 'Grazhdanskoe obshchestvo i vlast' k pravozashchitnym i nepravitel'stvennym organizatsyam," (Announcement from the Organizing Committee of the permanent roundtable "Civil society and the state" to human rights and nongovernmental organizations), Moscow, November 2001. In the same letter the committee called on all human rights groups to recognize that "democracy in Russia is taking a deliberate turn[;] on the highest level a course towards the construction of a police state has been taken."

21. Ibid.

22. Ludmila Alekseeva, answers to *Civitas.ru* correspondent questions about the Civic Forum, 19 October 2001, <http://www.civitas.ru/cgi-bin/interview.cgi?ref=5>.

23. Manana Alamazyan, answers to *Civitas.ru* correspondent questions about the Civic Forum, 9 November 2001, <http://www.civitas.ru/cgi-bin/interview.cgi?ref=7>.

24. Elizabet Bozhkova, answers to *Civitas.ru* correspondent questions about the Civic Forum, 6 November 2001, <http://www.civitas.ru/cgi-bin/interview.cgi?ref=14>.

25. Vladimir Mikhailov, "Uchastvovat' ili ne uchastvovat?'" (To participate or not to participate?), *Inostranets* 37 (October 2001): 7.

26. See "Reshenie rabochei gruppy Orgkomiteta Grazhdanskogo Foruma o regional'nikh kvotakh dlia uchastnikov Grazhdanskogo foruma" (Decision by the Working Group of the Civic Forum Organizing Committee on regional quotas for Civic Forum participants), Moscow, 9 October 2001, <http://www.civilforum.ru/chronicle/247.html>.

27. "Protsedura otbora uchastnikov Grazhdanskogo foruma" (Procedure for selection of Civic Forum participants), Moscow, 24 October 2001, <http://www.civilforum.ru/work/421.html>.

28. Ekaterina Grigor'eva, "Ministerstvo Grazhdanskogo obshchestvo" (Ministry of civil society), *Izvestiya*, 2 November 2001.

29. Yuri Dzibladze, "O raspredeleny mest mezhdu regionami RF" (On the distribution of seats among Russian regions), presentation at the Second People's Assembly Conference, Moscow, 3 November 2001.

30. See Vladimir Gundarev, "Veterany gotoviatsia k grazhdanskomu forumu" (Veterans prepare themselves for the Civic Forum), *Krasnaya zvezda*, 30 October 2001; Marina Chernukha, "Vlast' i obshchestvo: gotovnost' k dialogu" (Government and society: Preparation for dialogue), *Trud*, 24 October 2001; and Ivan Sukhov, "Ochered' vo Dvorets Cezdov" (Queue into the Congress Palace), *Vremia Novostei*, 6 November 2001.

31. Grigor'eva, "Ministerstvo Grazhdanskogo obshchestvo."

32. See <http://www.civilforum.ru/work/457.html>.

33. Gleb Pavlovski, "Vashi predlozhenya v povestku dnia Foruma i gosudarstva" (Your suggestions for the forum and governmental agendas), Moscow, 13 November 2001, <http://www.civilforum.ru/media/527.html>.

34. Andrei Babushkin, "Pochemu nel'zia pernosit' datu Foruma" (Why it is impossible to change the date of the forum), press conference statement, Moscow, 13 November 2001, <http://www.civitas.ru/point/thoughtmnenie16.html>.

35. "O kontseptsy oformlenya GKD i provedenya Grazhdanskogo foruma" (On the concepts for the arrangement of the Great Kremlin Palace and management of the Civic Forum), decision of the working group of the Organizing Committee, Moscow, 29 October 2001, <http://www.civilforum.ru/work/450.html>.

36. There was extensive debate on this issue in the forum preparations, as some felt that, at an official Kremlin event, proceedings should necessarily begin with the hymn. Others saw a contradiction in using a *state* song at a *civic* forum, and expressed early on their intention to sit if it were played. See the *civitas.ru* series of correspondent questionnaires on the Civic Forum available at <www.civitas.ru>.

37. "Vystuplenie predsedatelia Moskovskoi Khel'sinkoi Gruppy Liudmily Alekseevoi" (speech by Moscow-Helsinki Group chair Ludmila Alekseeva), Moscow, 21 November 2001, <http://www.civilforum.ru/forum/openplenum/87176.html>.

38. "Vystuplenie Presidenta Rossisskoi Federatsy Vladimira Putina" (speech by Russian president Vladimir Putin), <http://www.civilforum.ru/forum/openplenum/85321.html>.

39. Ibid.

40. Ibid.

41. For a thoughtful account of the note-passing see Lev Bruni, "Moskva, Kreml' Putinu" (Moscow, Kremlin, to Putin), *Vesti*, 21 November 2001.

42. For a full list see "Temy diskussy Grazhdanskogo Foruma" (Civic Forum discussion topics), <http://www.civilforum.ru/>.

43. "Sem' sovetov po bezopasnomy provedenyu na forume" (Seven recommendations for safe conduct at the forum), *Grazhdanka*, 10 November 2001.

44. "Itogi problemnoi diskussy N8 'Zdorov'e naselenya i okruzhaiushchaia sreda'" (Results of thematic discussion N8 "Public health and environment"), *Grazhdanka*, 23 November 2001. In 2000, President Putin signed a decree eliminating the State Committee for Environmental Protection and the Federal Forestry Service, transferring responsibility for environmental protection to the Ministry of Natural Resources, the main body for promoting resource *development*. That the Ministry for Economic Development and Trade was one of the primary governmental bodies addressing environmental issues at the forum is consistent with the Putin administration's trend of viewing environmental resource concerns primarily in the context of economic dividends.

45. Career naval officer and military journalist Grigory Pasko was arrested in November 1997 and charged with high treason by the FSB after reporting on nuclear and chemical dumping by the Russian Navy's Pacific Fleet. He spent twenty months in custody before being acquitted in July 1999. He was, however, convicted of lesser charges, includ-

ing abuse of official authority, but released on amnesty. The verdict was appealed by both sides, and in November 2000 the Military Collegium of the Russian Supreme Court repealed the first verdict and sent the case to a new trial in Vladivostok. The December 2001 trial resulted in Pasko's conviction for treason through espionage. The latest verdict has also been appealed by both sides, with no date set for a hearing as of this writing.

46. "Vladimir Cherneshev o sobytyakh nedeli" (Vladimir Chernyshev on the week's events), *Itogi s evgeniem Kiselevym*, 25 November 2001, <www.ntvru.com/itogi/25Nov2001/chernyshev21.html>.

47. Elena Korotkova, "ChP grazhdanskogo masshtaba" (Emergency on a civic scale), *Moskovsky komsomolets*, 23 November 2001.

48. For a list of closing session summaries, see <http://www.civilforum.ru/forum/endplenum/>.

49. "Ottsu Putina otkazano v lubvi" (Putin's father is denied love), *Agentsvo Politicheskikh Novostei*, 29 October 2001.

50. "Vystuplenie Presidenta Rossisskoi Federatsy Vladimira Putina" (speech by Russian president Vladimir Putin), <http://www.civilforum.ru/forum/openplenum/85321.html>.

51. "Sostoiavshysia nedavno Grazhdansky forum, nesmotria na vsiu predshestvuiushchuiu emy shumkhu i shirokoe ocveshchenie v SMI ostalsia nezamechennym bol'shinstvom rossian, konstatiruiut 'Versty'" (Irrespective of the advance hype and wide discussion in the media, the recent Civic Forum remained unnoticed by the majority of Russians, ascertains "Versty"), *Natsionalnaia Sluzhba Novostei*, 11 December 2001.

52. See note 20 and "Rezoliutsya Vserossyskoi pravozashchitnoi konferentsy 'Grazhdanskoe obshchestvo i vlast': puti i problemy vzaimodeistvya,' O edinstve pravozashchitnogo dvizhenya" (Resolution of the all-Russian human rights conference: "Civil society and the state: Paths and problems of cooperation," on the unity of the human rights movement), *Sochi*, 3 November 2001.

53. "Vlast' podvodit itogi Grazhdanskogo Foruma" (The state summarizes the results of the Civic Forum), *Itogi*, 14 February 2001, <http://www.civitas.ru/press.shtml>.

54. The material at <http://www.civilforum.ru/media/> provides a substantial introduction.