

# On the Road to the Civic Forum: State and Civil Society from Yeltsin to Putin

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On 21–22 November 2001, an extraordinary event took place in the Kremlin: Vladimir Putin, members of his cabinet, and other government officials met with representatives of more than three hundred nongovernmental and noncommercial organizations (NGOs and NCOs) to discuss practical measures for solving Russia's social problems. The president and government ministers, attempting to strengthen the state after a decade of turmoil, made overtures to Russia's slowly developing civil society, claiming that an effective and democratic state requires a strong, well-organized, and independent society. President Yeltsin had also reached out to social groups, seeking a "social accord" to support his political and economic reforms in 1992 and 1994. But the 2001 meeting differed from Yeltsin's populist-driven sessions. Russia's growing civil society, although still undeveloped by contemporary standards, is now more structured, and its practitioners operate from a more interest-driven set of priorities. Independent activists are now able to engage the president from a position of increased strength, as evidenced by the fact that they rejected Putin's attempts to privilege certain NGOs over others, exacerbate disagreements between NGOs and some human rights groups, and determine the composition and orientation of the Civic Forum.<sup>1</sup> Russia's independent groups organized their own participation in the conference, put their mark on the structure of the forum, and composed an agenda for future action. Although Russian civil society, as its activists realize, is in no position to engage the state as an equal partner, the Putin-initiated Civic Forum was a recognition of the social and political importance of independent groups as they organize to consolidate their resources.

Still, the nagging question of motivation remains. Was the Civic Forum merely an attempt by a wily Putin to co-opt Russia's independent associations, to "tame" them using "open dialogue" to mask authoritarian plans?<sup>2</sup> Or was this meeting indicative of a new model of state-society relations, heralding an unprecedented opportunity for independent groups to gain legitimacy, obtain

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resources, hold state officials accountable, and help address social problems?<sup>3</sup> On these questions the jury is still out. It is clear that Putin, disingenuously or not, is now publicly articulating what theorists and activists have been saying for a long time: civil society is essential for the consolidation of democracy. The very public recognition of that fact legitimates the goals of civil society in official discourse and offers a presidential commitment to steer federal resources toward the institutionalization of civil society activity. It also challenges independent groups to organize at the federal level, dispense with debilitating bickering, pool their resources, and develop strategies to cooperate with state officials in the pursuit of common goals while holding those officials accountable for their actions.

Despite an overconceptualization of the term and disagreements over definitions, attributes, orientations, and levels of development, "civil society" has entered the parlance of transition theories and practice, as the Russian literature indicates. Civil society contributes to the consolidation of democracy for several reasons: the liberal (as opposed to communal) self-organization of society promotes values of democratic citizenship,<sup>4</sup> creates a support base for democratic leaders,<sup>5</sup> goes hand in hand with a free enterprise market economy,<sup>6</sup> strengthens the activity of democratic political parties,<sup>7</sup> prevents the state from drifting toward authoritarianism,<sup>8</sup> makes the executive and legislative branches from the local to the federal level more effective and responsive,<sup>9</sup> promotes a more efficient use of local resources,<sup>10</sup> and addresses social problems more effectively than the government can.<sup>11</sup> Civil society assumes sociological as well as political and economic importance by integrating individuals and groups into a community bound together by common laws and norms of behavior,<sup>12</sup> reconstituting a common public identity of individuals as voluntary citizens after the forced public participation of the communist years<sup>13</sup> and allowing citizens to define the standards on which social relations are based, thus preventing the state from "colonizing" public life.<sup>14</sup> The definition of civil society used here corresponds to the Russian usage: "A society in which people are capable of self-organization on a variety of bases for the resolution of group and common problems [based on] a system of institutions and initiatives independent of the state."<sup>15</sup> Russians have adopted the term "third sector" to describe the realm in which these independent associations and initiatives take place: "The collection of independent social organizations, not structurally subservient to state organs or organs of local self-management and not pursuing goals of receiving commercial gains from their activities."<sup>16</sup> Though some scholars make a distinction between a civil society and a third sector,<sup>17</sup> the terms tend to be used interchangeably in the Russian literature, as they are here.

The significant question is the extent to which a civil society has begun to develop in Russia. Can Russia's third sector help steer the state and its officials in a democratic direction while socializing citizens to organize society according to a defined set of interests and to represent those interests in bodies of state power? The obstacles are many: cultural orientations, absence of organizational skills, lack of long-term funding, weak structural supports (such as a middle class and a free enterprise economic system), corruption, and obstruction by state,

regional, and local officials. Yet attempts to dismiss the relevance or exaggerate the weakness of civil society in Russia overlook an important opportunity to assess the halting yet significant construction of social self-organization in the most adverse of circumstances. Small steps have been taken toward the institutionalization of a civil society in postcommunist Russia, and the trail they leave and direction they take offer insights into the nature of civil society construction and the extent to which it can further democratization.

In this context of evolutionary development, the 2001 Civic Forum was not simply a potential new beginning for independent groups in Russia, brought out of obscurity and isolation by the recognition of their existence by the president. It was, more precisely, the culmination of a decade-long process of creation, formation, and institutionalization at the local and regional levels throughout Russia. The process has been slow and frustrating but has led, after all, to the Kremlin gates. This article examines ten years of civil society development in Russia, from 1991 to 2001. Development has progressed through four stages: the demobilization of civil society in the first years of Russian independence, the institutionalization of the third sector in law and mentality, the development of third sector activism at local and regional levels, and the federalization of civil society development with the Civic Forum. Both state officials and civil society activists promote a “strong state–strong society” model of democratic transition, an ideal of state-society relations that applies Russian cultural standards of *gosudarstvennost* and *sobornost* to the liberal tenets of the democratic transition.

### Demobilization

A “demobilization” of Russian independent activism followed in the wake of the Soviet system’s demise, a process common to all emerging civil societies in the former Soviet bloc. First, the dissolution of the Soviet party-state, the focus of the explosion of informal groups since 1987, took the wind out of the sails of the informal movement, as individuals and groups faced a changing array of problems and reoriented their activities in the context of a new state structure and the reorganization of politics, the economy, and society. The decline in independent activism was precipitated not only by changes in the social structure but also by efforts of political elites to discourage activism in the initial phases of postcommunist state construction. Second, the introduction of shock-therapy economic reforms and their distortion at the hands of the nomenklatura capitalists and emerging oligarchs not only impoverished a significant portion of the country and inhibited the development of a middle class, it also began to reconfigure the structure of social interests that gives birth to activism. As Michael Bernhard notes in his comparative study of civil society demobilization: “Economic recession demobilizes support for reform and mobilizes groups behind political leaderships that oppose it. This reorientation of the axes of political conflict has the short term effect of weakening the existing organizational basis of civil society, while providing new issues that will help realign it.”<sup>18</sup> The highly charged political atmosphere of the Gorbachev era gave way to the economic malaise of the Yeltsin years, and that was reflected in independent group activism in postcommunist Russia.

Third, at that time there were few legal parameters within which independent groups could operate. The 1990 Law on Associations continued to be the legal foundation for group registration with justice authorities in the initial postcommunist period, but the structures and processes that had regulated group activity were no longer in place. There were no laws defining the legal status of a variety of groups, regulating their activity, or articulating their relations with administrative or legislative organs of power at a time when institutions at all of those levels were in the very process of formation. With no clear institutionalization of power from 1991 to 1993, it was impossible for struggling independent groups to have any impact on policymaking. The very structure of the new Russian state

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was still in question, with relations among the central state, regions, and republics still undefined and local governments still in the process of formation. The few independent groups that formed had little opportunity to pursue their interests or influence policymaking at any level. With only weak organizational and normative structures in place

to shape the pursuit of individual or group interests, public life became a battleground of corruption, coercion, and crime.<sup>19</sup> In the absence of support structures, such as a court system to guarantee their legal rights, attentive media to advertise their activities, or an economic system that could support their efforts, independent groups, as did most citizens, hunkered down to survive the transition.

A fourth reason for the demobilization of civil society was the brain drain. Not surprisingly, given the poor conditions for civil society development, some of the most energetic, talented, and ambitious activists of the informal movement period of 1987–89 began to redirect their energies first to parliamentary and party politics in Soviet Russia in 1989 and 1990 and then to the executive branch when the momentum switched from party formation to state construction in post-Soviet Russia in 1991.<sup>20</sup> That process continued into the 1990s, as talented activists threw their efforts into the emerging private economic sector or regional politics.<sup>21</sup>

### **Institutionalization in Law and Mentality**

Despite the pressures toward demobilization, independent group activism continued to develop. Some very active groups that formed in the late 1980s, such as No to Alcohol and Drugs, Memorial, the Committee of Soldiers’ Mothers, and Interlegal, as well as a plethora of environmental organizations especially active in St. Petersburg, continued their activities, developing strategies to influence policymakers even in the tumultuous conditions of the early transition period.<sup>22</sup> An initial flood of Western funding from western Europe, the Nordic countries, North America, and international aid foundations dedicated to the establishment

of a civil society in postcommunist Russia encouraged the creation of independent groups and regional centers for civic initiatives where there otherwise would have been none. Democratic activists in the Moscow and St. Petersburg local governments, elected in the 1990 elections, worked hard to create links between the city governments and independent groups to encourage their participation in policymaking.

But it was not until fundamental problems of state construction were solved—specifically, the balance of power between executive and legislative branches, the development of a court and legal system, and the federal structure of the Russian state—that policymakers and activists could turn their attention toward establishing the legal foundations for an autonomous sphere of independent group activity. To wrest an independent sphere of activity from the stranglehold of executive power structures and informal networks of political decisionmaking it was necessary to establish laws that would define and protect the status of NGOs and NKO. Important also was the development of a “mentality of autonomy” in the minds of activists, government officials, and the population at large, who tended to view group activism as tied to state or political party mobilization efforts and subject to patronage ties at all levels of government. These measures were by no means sufficient to the development of a mature civil society, but they were necessary preconditions for its taking root in postcommunist Russia. Yeltsin’s top-heavy, overbureaucratized, and ineffective state at least established the conditional parameters within which a civil society could develop. Russian activists matched the institutionalization of law with an institutionalization in mentality, as they propagated the idea of a third sector to government officials and their local communities.

The constitution of 1993 guaranteed civil liberties and, just as important to the orientation of Russian civil society activity, identified Russia as a “social state,” where political rights are supplemented with “guaranteed protection” of work, health, family support, and social security.<sup>23</sup> Although constitutional guarantees remain formalities until put into practice and buttressed with legal, institutional, and behavioral support, they offer a foundation on which independent groups have claimed their rights. Four laws passed by the Russian Federation State Duma and signed by President Yeltsin in 1995 have been especially important to Russia’s independent groups: the Law on Political Associations, the Law on Philanthropic Activities and Organizations, the Law on Noncommercial Organizations, and the Law on Local Self-Government.<sup>24</sup> Those measures establish the legal status of independent groups, the recourse by which groups can defend their rights in the court system, the rules that govern independent group activity in public life, the registration procedures for groups at the federal level, the framework by which groups interact with government officials, and a template for related laws at the regional and local levels. The Law on Public Associations defines a public association as a “voluntary, self-managed non-commercial formation created on the initiative of citizens associating on the basis of common interests for the realization of common goals” and names five types of groups recognized as juridical entities.<sup>25</sup> The law regulates the relationship between government authorities and inde-

pendent groups, emphasizing equality before the law: "State organs and organs of local self-government and their official entities which cause damage to public associations by virtue of violations of [this law] and other laws related to specific types of public associations, will be responsible for their actions as stipulated in criminal, civil, and administrative legislation of the Russian Federation."<sup>26</sup>

The registration of NGOs and NKO's is not mandatory but does provide access to resources that unregistered groups do not have. Groups must be registered to be eligible for funding from state and local governments, to bid for government service contracts, and to apply for municipal and other grants. Jurists encourage independent groups to register with justice administrations so that they can "defend the rights of their organization in the legal system."<sup>27</sup> The 1995 Law on Social Organizations established a four-year term in which independent groups had to reregister with the justice authorities. Groups failing to do so were denied their legal status. A new federal law "On the Registration of Juridical Entities," adopted in August 2001, established a new period of registration and reregistration for groups and "obliges active NKO's to present to registration organs a series of information and documents in the course of six months . . . from June 1 to December 2002."<sup>28</sup> It is still unclear from this law which groups will have to (re)register and with which authorities; the registration process may be switched from the justice authorities to the tax authorities. The law is designed to eliminate from the books the many groups that exist only on paper, to update the information on active groups, and to establish accurately the tax status of groups, some of which should be tax exempt based on charitable activities and some of which should pay taxes on income-generating activities.

Laws have gone a long way toward establishing the legal foundation within which independent groups pursue their activities. They have resulted in a slow but palpable realization in the minds of activists and officials that the law can and should be used to protect the rights of individuals and groups and to promote the activism of independent organizations. This has been a new realization to most Russians, used to viewing law as a tool in the hands of government officials to legitimate capricious policies and mask the informal networks of reciprocal glad-handing that fueled policymaking.

Along with the legal foundations of civil society development emerged a new mentality toward independent group activism. During the mid-1990s, the concept of a third sector as an autonomous sphere of activism took root in the minds of both activists and local government officials. Independent groups have struggled to carve out a third sector as both a source of identity and a foundation for developing the resources to engage in relations with government officials and business groups as an independent partner. Activists stress the need for networking and resource sharing across a wide variety of groups for the purpose of establishing a bounded third sector that is more than just a collection of single groups:

It is one thing when people know that there is a host of small foundations, clubs, associations and the like, which are busy with some "trifling" things . . . , and another when all of these numerous organizations are perceived as a single movement, taking a worthy place in the public consciousness. It is only then that one may hope

for attention to the problems of the third sector, for the successful solution of such problems will to a great extent determine the well-being of our society.<sup>29</sup>

In May 1993 nine third-sector groups signed a “third-sector agreement” to “unite their efforts toward the effective use of resources and abilities, the strengthening of cooperation, the dissemination of information and exchange of experience, the provision of legal support, and the implementation of lofty ethical principles.”<sup>30</sup> Activists continue to maintain the integrity of a third sector in the face of political and economic pressures. Third-sector activists, for example, make wide use of the Internet to maintain the informational integrity of the sector in the face of government control over and pressure on the media and lack of coverage and ethical standards in the media in general.<sup>31</sup> This is especially important in light of Putin’s recent efforts to undermine the independence of the media.<sup>32</sup>

### **Local and Regional Civil Society Development: Problems and Solutions**

Institutionalization in law and mentality has allowed for a slow but steady growth in the number of NGOs and NKO, as well as a change in the quality of their relations with local and regional government officials throughout the 1990s. Both the number of groups and the level of interaction vary greatly across Russia’s regions, depending on the nature of regional leadership and the mentality of the inhabitants.<sup>33</sup> In Nizhegorod oblast, for example, there were sixty-four groups registered (under the 1990 law) with the oblast administration in 1991; five years later, 188 groups had registered.<sup>34</sup> In the first NGO/NKO directory of a twelve-city region in Novosibirsk, published in the mid-1990s, there appeared four hundred groups; in the 1999 directory, 1,800 were listed.<sup>35</sup> Activists noted the “stormy growth” of NGO/NKO groups in the 1990s, with seven hundred in the city of Barnaul, 111 in the city of Biisk, and seventy in the small town of Slavgorod.<sup>36</sup> By March 1998, the Omsk oblast administration of justice had registered 1,277 groups.<sup>37</sup> The number of Cossack organizations in the Kuban, according to one Russian sociologist, went from about ten in 1992 to twenty-one in 1996 to eighty-five in 1999. By the deadline for the reregistration process in 1999, thirty-four of the eighty-five were officially dissolved by a local court for not complying with the registration rules in the Law on Social Organizations, leaving fifty-one active groups.<sup>38</sup> Moscow has seen an explosion of independent groups, with about twenty thousand registered in 2001.<sup>39</sup> In 1993, Russia’s third sector included about fifty thousand organizations; in summer 1997, federal and local organs of justice had registered nearly sixty-six thousand organizations, and when Liudmila Alekseeva gave the opening speech at the 2001 Civic Forum, she claimed that “350,000 NGOs [throughout Russia] employ about one million people who assist 20 million Russians.”<sup>40</sup> Estimates are that about seventy thousand of these groups are active.

One must, of course, be cautious with these numbers: there is a substantial amount of self-reporting involved; not all of the registered groups are active; some of the registered groups are fronts for criminal organizations; and others dissolve after a short existence. Despite tendencies toward number inflation, there has been an objective increase in the number of NGOs and NKOs active throughout

Russia. Categories of groups include human rights, environmental protection, women's issues, entrepreneurs, farmers, the professions, consumer societies, cultural and national interests, children and youth concerns, invalids, military, education, science, and politics. Cossack organizations developed around issues of military service, the promotion of law and order, and land ownership.<sup>41</sup> Most groups are not politically extreme; in fact nationalist or neofascist movements have been notably weak. Most independent groups either reflect legitimate interests of their participants or address Russia's pressing social problems.

Certainly even accurate numbers and categorization do not tell the whole story. As one local government official noted, it is easy to form a group; it is far more difficult to establish a viable goal and to develop the resources and strategies necessary to attain it.<sup>42</sup> The critical question is how effective NGOs and NKO are at organizing, cultivating domestic sources of financial support, developing a mass base, influencing the policymaking process, and monitoring the actions of government officials, legislators, and political parties. The ends most often articulated by third-sector activists are threefold: to consolidate the self-organization of society, to affect policies, and to hold officials at all levels accountable to the wider public.

The problems surrounding NGO/NKO activity in Russia are well known; their pervasiveness and intensity have led some observers to mistakenly dismiss the idea of civil society development in Russia as either a pipe dream of Western idealists or so weak as to be completely insignificant in the transition process. It is clear that an emerging Russian third sector could not be a driving force in the transition process. This is hardly surprising. Not only was there no foundation for an effective civil society throughout Russian history, but the state set out actively to destroy it during the Soviet period. The expectation that an effective civil society could emerge after only a few years is unrealistic. To dismiss the significance of an emerging Russian civil society because of its underdevelopment, however, is to miss the opportunity to examine two important developments: (a) the struggle by Russian activists to consolidate a civil society in the face of overwhelming historical and contemporary obstacles and (b) the process of democratic consolidation, as halting as it is, in the conditions peculiar to Russia in the twenty-first century. It is with this in mind that problems facing Russian civil society, as Russian activists see them, are catalogued here.

Problems are easily identifiable. The biggest problem has been the domination of local and regional politics by overbearing mayors and governors.<sup>43</sup> A lack of organizational skills made it difficult for groups to form and develop a mass membership. There was no foundation, either technical or cultural, for networking and pooling resources. A lack of professionalism in preparing documents and applying to local governments for grants hampered meaningful third-sector activism. Those points are noted by local government officials, some of whom are sympathetic to NGOs/NKOs but frustrated by the low levels of organization and professionalism characterizing their activities. Officials complain that not only are some groups unprepared to propose a viable budget, but many times the goals of the group are too sweeping to have any practical application. And



although sociologists may laud civil society as an arena of integration and civic identity, participants seeking mainly self-fulfillment from activism only frustrate the efforts of officials to work with independent groups to implement policies.<sup>44</sup>

Funding has also proved to be an enormous problem in Russia's emerging civil society. Although the influx of Western and international aid to support the activity of independent groups and the institutionalization of a civil society may be considered a solution rather than a problem, it has raised concerns on a number of levels. First, many Russians are suspicious of the motivations behind Western funding, considering it an attempt to influence the course of the postcommunist transition in ways that undermine Russian interests and Russian culture.<sup>45</sup> Others

recognize that less self-serving motives may be involved and that Western funding is directed at Russian NGOs and NKO's, as opposed to political parties, because effective independent groups are the linchpin of the liberal model of political development, and Westerners have an interest in helping to establish liberal democracy in postcommunist

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Russia.<sup>46</sup> Even so, problems remain. Valerie Sperling and Rebecca Kay, in two separate studies, have meticulously catalogued the impact of Western funding on women's organizations in postcommunist Russia.<sup>47</sup> While jump-starting the process of women's independent activism, Western funding carries with it a discourse, an assumed approach to the nature and solution of social problems, and methods of organization that are not indigenous to the Russian language, culture, or social organization. The competition for scarce funds at times sets women's groups against each other and creates a sense of elitism around those groups that are more successful at obtaining funding. Western funding, both scholars note, exacerbates class and status differences among Russian women, creating stronger ties between Russian and Western activists and intellectual elites than among Russian women; the interests and “voices” of less-educated, rural, and working-class women tend to be ignored.

Western aid may also be overly focused on large NGOs staffed by Western-oriented Russian activists who are engaged in social service and public interest projects. Critics argue that this represents only the tip of a developed civil society iceberg and that funding needs to be directed toward the encouragement of smaller groups with lower profiles to propagate the values and practices of independent self-organization. The goal, these critics argue, should not be to create links between Western funders and Russian activists but to encourage Russians to respond to their own constituencies.<sup>48</sup>

Russians are also fully aware that foreign funding might dry up, endangering the progress of independent group activism. Local government officials worry

about the effect this could have on local populations: social organizations may obtain grants to provide social assistance to needy local groups—but what happens when funds are depleted, the charity organizations go bankrupt, and the local government has no money to continue the program? The needy will be worse off, in a sense, because of the expectations of assistance.<sup>49</sup> Russia's economic crisis, the dearth of internal funding, laws discouraging charitable giving, the absence of a tax code applicable to NGOs and NKO's, and the weakness of the free enterprise system and culture of business-community relations are all factors inhibiting the foundation of a domestic financial base for independent activism. Attempts by third-sector activists to cultivate this base, as well as a general improvement in the Russian economy since 1998 and a reorientation of economic priorities are reasons for optimism, but it is safe to say that without foreign funding in the 1990s, Russian civil society would not have gotten off the ground.

Another problem during the 1990s was the weakness of the legal system and the inconsistency of laws at the federal, regional, and local levels. Laws themselves are no guarantee of positive outcomes. Russian third-sector activists are quick to note that laws supporting civil society development are not always honored by local or regional officials. Laws often have no force when authorities are intent on pursuing their own interests, especially in local and regional prosecutors' offices.<sup>50</sup> Federal laws are often not supported by local legislation, further hampering third-sector activity. The Law on Local Self-Government passed at the federal level in 1995 is a case in point. Many third-sector activists complain of the absence of local and regional laws designed to implement democratic local self-government. Often local administrations are considered by activists to be part of a hierarchy of state power, subject to the vicissitudes of politicking at the federal and regional levels, rather than democratic, responsive, and dynamic offices that work with local constituencies to effect meaningful change. This, in large part, results from inconsistent legislation and behavior of officials throughout Russia, the absence of "budgetary federalism," and the related lack of transparency in budgetary transfers from the federal level to the localities.<sup>51</sup>

Contributing to these problems is the absence of structural supports for civil society development in Russia. The absence of strong federalism, an effective state, a developed middle class, a free enterprise system, and independent news media that uphold ethical standards are all cited by activists as contributing to the weakness of civil society development. On the theme of local self-government, for example, the Yeltsin strategy of concluding "treaties" between the federal government and subjects of the federation (republics and regions) on everything from tax breaks to regional and local control over resources, as if the subjects were independent states, created ill-defined and inconsistent federal-regional-local political relationships. Russian activists point out that this strategy only contributes to separatist tendencies in Russia. The "treaty state" as opposed to a "constitutional state," Marina Sal'e argues, weakens the consolidation of democracy in Russia and makes impossible the development of local self-government, which requires consistent, well-defined relations among local governments and between local governments and higher levels of government administration.<sup>52</sup>

The shock therapy reforms of the Yeltsin era and the consequent push by the nomenklatura capitalists and oligarchs to gain the lion's share of the country's wealth weakened the development of a middle class and left precious little capital or economic opportunities for small- and medium-sized businesses to fuel a free enterprise system. Russian activists consider an active middle class, a free enterprise system, and a vibrant civil society to go hand in hand.<sup>53</sup> Not only does a middle class have the disposable income necessary to support independent activism, but its members are oriented more toward public life and civic responsibilities. A strong free enterprise system can provide funding for third-sector activities, allowing independent groups to develop mutually beneficial relationships with businesses to address social problems and engender community trust.

The most important structural weakness, according to Russian civil society activists, is the lack of effective state power. Understanding the need to prevent the development of an overbearing state and to keep state officials accountable, activists nonetheless note that a prerequisite for a functioning civil society is an effective state. This includes established channels of policymaking and representation, the ability to enforce just tax codes, and the tools necessary to prevent the capturing of state power or the colonization of public life by self-interested actors such as the nomenklatura capitalists or oligarchs.<sup>54</sup> Russian civil society activists do not see themselves as a permanent opposition to an authoritarian-oriented state. They adhere to a "strong state–strong society" model: The institutionalization of state power is a prerequisite for civil society development, and a strong civil society is vital to ensuring the state's democratic orientation. The "weak state–weak society" model of the Yeltsin era only exacerbated problems of civil society development.

### **Solutions**

Despite obstacles, and in the face of overwhelming odds, civil society has begun to sink roots in localities and regions throughout Russia. Granted, the process has been driven mostly by the Russian intelligentsia and Western funding, but in a context where Russian activists and Western funders know the importance of mass involvement and seek to establish the domestic foundation for civil society development. By the mid-1990s they had begun to offer and implement, to different degrees, some important solutions to the most critical of the problems noted above.

An effective relationship between independent activists and local government is the most oft-cited prerequisite for the consolidation of a postcommunist Russian civil society by activists and scholars. Russian civil society activists consider democratic local self-government to be one of the most important prerequisites for the consolidation of a broad-based civil society throughout Russia. Activists have been persistent and dogged in their determination to establish effective NGOs and NKO's, to influence policymaking by creating links between their groups and local government, and to consolidate the gains of civil society development along the way. Three strategies emerged during the 1990s toward those ends: a concerted effort to institutionalize links with local governments, networking among social organizations and with the wider public, and funding pro-

posals to local governments and legislatures, many of which have been accepted in cities and towns throughout Russia.

Since the mid-1990s, NGOs and NKO have made it a top priority to develop communication, policymaking, and financial links with local and regional government, a sound strategy given the importance of responsive local governments for the development of effective civil societies.<sup>55</sup> In the early 1990s, local government officials either ignored or obstructed independent group activism, looking on it as an attempt to undermine their authority, disrupt local administration, or pilfer their meager financial resources. When they did seriously respond to NGOs, it was to absorb them into the local administration in a clientelistic relationship, a danger

duly noted by scholars of local government and democratization processes.<sup>56</sup> Third-sector activists set out to change this relationship, on the one hand using new laws to assert their rights vis-à-vis local authorities, and on the other hand showing local government officials that the relationship could be mutually beneficial. NGOs and NKOs showed local officials

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***“The progress made during the developmental period has been decidedly local in scope and varies greatly from locality to locality and region to region.”***

that they can help them develop a social base of support for their positions and their policies. Even more important, third-sector groups can help local officials augment their limited resources by cooperating to address local problems. Activists took the initiative and realized considerable success in creating the institutional and policymaking links to activate cooperation with local governments.

Activists have pushed for permanent “social-government” councils that bring together third-sector activists and local officials to address local problems. They base this effort on Article 25 of the 1995 Law on Local Self-Government, which states that “the population shall have the right of lawmaking initiative in regard to locally important issues. Draft legal acts . . . shall be subject to mandatory examination at open meetings with the participation of representatives of the population.”<sup>57</sup> Social-government councils have been formed in Moscow on the basis of issues (invalid concerns and women’s issues, for example) to stress the importance of horizontal links between local government and NGOs and to prevent the local government from co-opting third-sector activity into a hierarchical structure of power. Moscow mayor Yuri Luzhkov agreed that draft legislation in Moscow will be available for public review, offering NGOs with relevant expertise opportunities for consultation.<sup>58</sup> In summer 1995 the Moscow city council passed a law on charities, creating a social-government council of fifteen members—six from the city council, six from NGOs, the mayor, and two deputies of the mayor. The six NGO activists were nominated at an open meeting of Moscow NGOs and the city council and then confirmed and officially appointed by the mayor.<sup>59</sup>

Similar social-government councils have been established in cities and towns throughout Russia, and local governments have established offices charged with developing local government–third sector relations.<sup>60</sup> Third-sector activists make sure that these offices do not lie dormant or become overly bureaucratized by continuing to develop and propose legislation and to sponsor regular conferences for themselves, local and federal government officials, legislators, presidential envoys, legal and financial experts, political party and labor union representatives, and social scientists. Such conferences took place in the Siberian region in 1997 and 1998, with regular sessions planned in subsequent years, in Nizhny Novgorod in 1997, in Altai krai in 1998, and in the Kuzbass in 1998. Representatives from the government at the sessions included the head of an oblast administration's economic committee, the deputy director of an oblast administration's department on the development and support of entrepreneurs, an oblast deputy public prosecutor, and the head of a krai tax inspection office, among many others. Third-sector activists and local government officials and legislators address specific problems related to the encouragement of local activism and mutual cooperation in addressing social problems.

In January 1996, the Moscow city government's Department of Social and Inter-Regional Relations and the city's third-sector groups prepared a package of documents regulating relations between city government and social organizations.<sup>61</sup> A few years later, a related law, "On the Interaction of Organs of Power in the City of Moscow with Non-governmental, Non-commercial Organizations,"<sup>62</sup> was passed and NGO activists throughout Russia began to push for similar laws. In 1997 the Kemerovo oblast administration established a program of joint activities with the "social chamber" of the oblast, which led to a whole series of programs on social and economic development in the region.<sup>63</sup> In 2001, similar programs were initiated in Yakutia, Krasnodar krai, Rostov oblast, and Kaliningrad oblast.<sup>64</sup>

Networking strategies are designed to foster a foundation for permanent interaction between local government and independent organizations and to encourage civil society activism in localities. Countering the criticism that only large NGOs dominate the Russian third sector, activists have tried to encourage the formation of small, local independent groups by forming "social chambers" at the local level. In 1996 and 1997 in Omsk, Irkutsk, Tomsk, Kemerovo, Tumensk, Krasnoyarsk, Altai, and Novokuznetsk, councils of NKO were created to establish intersectoral links with government and businesses and inter-regional links with similar groups throughout Russia to coordinate their activities.<sup>65</sup> Activists in Novosibirsk developed the concept of the "NGO fair," a public event at which local NGOs and NKOs interact with the local population and inform them of their activities. The first fair, cosponsored by the local government and attended by the mayor, was held in Novosibirsk in 1996 and gathered seventy NGOs and more than four hundred people. In 1998, thirteen cities in the Siberian region held fairs attended by more than five hundred NGOs and city officials.<sup>66</sup>

One of the most pressing problems facing third-sector activists is financing. Aware that the Russian third sector cannot continue to rely on foreign funding, and

realizing that budgetary and financial links between it and local, regional, and federal government would serve to consolidate a cooperative relationship, activists took the lead in drafting legislation on social contracting and municipal grants. Members of Moscow's No to Alcohol and Drugs group (NAN) introduced and promoted legislation on the "social mandate," a system of financing that involves competitive bids by NGOs to carry out government-sponsored social programs. NAN's experience in aiding alcoholics and drug addicts had convinced members that the government was incapable of addressing drug addiction and other social problems. Formed in 1987 and registered as a nonprofit organization in 1991, NAN opened the first shelter for abandoned children in 1992, trying to fill a void in the state's provision of social services. Funds earmarked for social services in the state budget never reached the truly needy, and so, NAN leaders reasoned, "it was necessary to create a mechanism guaranteeing the rational use of budgetary funds invested in the social sphere."<sup>67</sup> NAN argues that NGOs are more capable of identifying social needs and crafting creative solutions than government officials. They don't, however, have the finances to follow through on projects. NGOs have the means but not the money; government has the money but not the means. The solution was a creative partnership between NGOs and government agencies. NAN wrote up a draft law. The social mandate is a process by which NGOs and NKO bid on government contracts for social services. Government officials determine the targeted recipients of budgetary funds, and an open competition is held among "legal entities of various property and organizational forms"—including NGOs and NKOs—to bid on government contracts to perform the needed social service. The winner signs a legally binding government contract. The program would involve no increase in allocated funds but is designed to use earmarked funds in the state budget more effectively and responsibly.

Two Russian State Duma deputies, V. V. Borshchev and A. G. Golov, introduced a draft law "On the State Social Mandate" in summer 1996. State Duma Deputy B. Zorkal'tsev noted that the legislation is important both to improve the social defense of the population and to strengthen the structural foundations of a civil society: "the state ought to encourage the activity of noncommercial organizations for the solution of the social problems of society, including the use of state budget resources. . . . [This law] will guarantee the raising of the numerical strength of social organizations springing up in our society."<sup>68</sup> The draft law was considered by the Committee on the Activities of Social and Religious Organizations and the Committee on Labor and Social Policy; the first hearing of the bill was held in February 1997. A law has yet to be passed at the federal level.

Similar laws had more success at the local levels. Seminars on the social mandate were held in cities and towns throughout Russia beginning in 1996. In March, a two-day conference on the theory and practice of the social mandate was held in the offices of the city council and brought together government officials, lawmakers, and NGO representatives to discuss a draft law.<sup>69</sup> At the conference, leaders of NGOs and NKOs lamented the heavy-handed role of the state bureaucracy in stifling the distribution of resources to needy citizens and the absence of effective mechanisms of incorporating third-sector participation in executive and leg-

islative policymaking at the state and local levels.<sup>70</sup> Government officials, for their part, noted that independent groups must enhance their organizational capacity and their image as responsible partners in addressing social problems, develop programs to solve problems, learn to “sell” their programs to civil servants, and use financial resources more effectively.<sup>71</sup> In summer 1996, the law was passed in the city of Moscow. A similar law was passed by the legislative assembly in the Tiumen oblast in July 1997; “social mandate,” “municipal mandate,” and “municipal grant” draft laws were written, distributed, and discussed in Barnaul (Altai krai), Kemerovo oblast, Novosibirsk oblast, Omsk oblast, and Chitinsk oblast throughout 1998; and in 2000 a draft law was introduced to the legislative assembly in the Pskov oblast.<sup>72</sup> In conferences and workshops with local and regional government officials, third-sector activists consistently push for the inclusion of the social mandate in budget calculations and for the contracting out of services as a method for elevating the role of independent groups in policy implementation and democratization at the local and regional levels.

The significance of the social mandate and the process that went into its formulation and implementation by Russian third-sector groups should not be underestimated. Funds made available to independent groups may initially be very limited, for although social mandate laws may be on the books, money for effective long-term programs may not be readily available.<sup>73</sup> But it is the engagement of third-sector activists in drafting the legislation, lobbying deputies and local and regional government officials, holding information seminars with small, local independent organizations about the social mandate, and working with local administrations to put social contracting into practice that will have lasting importance. Third-sector activists are actively cultivating a culture and practice of democratization from below and refuse to be merely passive objects of postcommunist reforms introduced by the state.

Progress has been undeniably slow but palpable. In the early 1990s, it is safe to say, there was no autonomous third sector, either in practice or in mentality, and there were no effective links between local government and independent groups. That has changed: the links have been forged, a culture of cooperation between some local government officials—once hostile to or ambivalent about independent activism—and third-sector groups has been engendered, and as a result, policies to support third-sector activism have been implemented in towns, cities, oblasts, and kraia throughout Russia. Has an effective civil society thus emerged in postcommunist Russia? The answer remains no. The progress made during the developmental period has been decidedly local in scope and varies greatly from locality to locality and region to region. Varying attitudes on the part of local leaders and government officials, levels of self-government, standards of living, and development of the free enterprise system all affect the numbers of independent groups and the intensity and effectiveness of their activism.<sup>74</sup> In very adverse conditions, third-sector activists have established a foundation for civil society development at the local and regional levels. They would, however, need support from the highest levels of the state to elevate local progress to the national limelight, thereby consolidating their gains and strengthening the consistency

of civil society development throughout Russia. Although it is unclear whether he originally intended to offer this support, President Putin clearly afforded third-sector activists the opportunity to do exactly that with his convocation of the Civic Forum at the end of 2001.

### **From the Local to the Federal: State and Civil Society under Putin**

The preceding account illustrates that the groundwork has slowly been established for a civil society in postcommunist Russia. Despite the many problems faced by independent groups, they have woven a thin but durable web of interaction among themselves and between a bounded third sector and local and regional government. They have changed the attitudes of some government officials toward cooperation with third-sector groups, helped to establish government offices charged with cultivating ties to local groups, established regular lobbying activities with legislative assembly committees, proposed and drafted laws on domestic financing for third-sector groups, and successfully developed programs to help solve Russia's social problems.

Third-sector activists have known for a long time that the lack of active support on the part of federal officials negatively affects the activity of third-sector groups and limits the extent of their influence on policymaking. Putin's recognition of the efforts of Russia's third sector, his emphasis on the importance of civil society development to democratization in Russia, and the establishment of a framework of cooperation between third-sector groups and federal policymakers have propelled third-sector activism from the local to the federal level. Putin's overtures to Russia's third sector differ from similar Yeltsin ploys: Yeltsin attempted to garner populist support for stringent economic reforms without recognizing the need to engage independent groups in an active effort to help solve the social problems connected with those reforms. Yeltsin's government was willing to establish the institutional foundations for a civil society in Russia—but not to promote independent group activities or recognize their potential at the national level. Russia's third sector was not differentiated, autonomous, or well enough established to offer its services as a "partner" to the government at the federal level in 1991. By 2001, this was starting to change. Third-sector organizations had developed the confidence to engage in a dialogue with state leaders on the basis of their growing expertise on social problems, their expanding membership, the increasing professionalism of their activities, their experience in drafting legislation, and their practical knowledge of the sometimes byzantine political process in postcommunist Russia. While fully recognizing the problems of institutionalizing civil society activity in Russia, they were prepared to engage Putin on their own terms when he provided the opportunity for a national forum on state-civil society relations.

The first and most pressing question was the president's motivation for calling the forum. While some commentators dismissed Putin's overtures out of hand as just another attempt to co-opt civil society organizations into a vertical hierarchy of state power and to bring them to heel under the watchful eye of Putin's increasingly authoritarian state,<sup>75</sup> others saw more complex political, economic,



and social motivations behind Putin's efforts to interact with Russia's emerging civil society. Georgy Satarov, writing in *Rossiiskaia Gazeta*, notes several possible motivations: to build a firm foundation of social support in the absence of mass-based political parties, to engage third-sector groups in assisting the state's implementation of social programs, to gain support for his economic reforms, to modernize Russia's political system by encouraging the active involvement of an organized citizenry, and to establish a dependable source of information for state officials on public opinion, social problems, and policy implementation.<sup>76</sup> Whatever Putin's intentions, third-sector activists were not about to be orchestrated into insignificance by a scheming president or awed by an audience in the Kremlin. The representatives of Russia's third sector to a large extent shaped the event according to their main interests: broad representation of the third sector and not simply organizations that would exhibit their loyalty to the president, the creation of a partnership between civil society groups and government policymakers to address pressing social problems, and the strengthening of the organizational, financial, and political foundations of the third sector as a whole.

The process of dialogue began in spring 2001 when Putin met with presidential envoys in the seven new federal superdistricts and enjoined them to promote the work of civil society activists. On 12 June 2001 Putin met with representatives of selected NGOs and NKO's. According to some accounts, Putin attempted to privilege certain independent groups over others (shunning those most critical of the state, such as Memorial and the Committee of Soldiers' Mothers) and to undermine the cohesion of umbrella civil society organizations (by inviting some members but not others).<sup>77</sup> Refusing to play this game, civil society activists established their own ground rules for organizing their participation in a Kremlin meeting; these were put into place for the November 2001 meeting with Putin and other government officials. Some human rights organizations, however, still refused on principle to engage in any kind of a dialogue with state officials.

The People's Assembly, an umbrella group of civil society organizations, was created in December 2000 to "organize a real arena of public interaction with executive and legislative authorities in the resolution of one of the most vitally important questions of the development of NKO's—taxation."<sup>78</sup> The group made its own demands when the Presidential Administration asked it to join the organizing committee for the November 2001 Civic Forum, after the administration finally "realized the impossibility of organizing a Civic Forum without the participation of really authoritative social forces."<sup>79</sup> Going into the forum, the People's Assembly called for a new organizational committee with the formal participation of representatives of the federal government, the working group of the June 2001 conference organizational committee, and representatives of independent groups throughout Russia. They also called for the reformulation of organizational groups at the oblast and okrug administrative levels in response to the increased participation put into place for the November meeting. The group asked that Russian and international organizations registered with the Russian Federation Ministry of Justice constitute 20 percent of the groups at the Civic Forum and that the financial support of the organizational committee be fully transpar-

ent in terms of sources and disbursement.<sup>80</sup> The People's Assembly made it clear that the main goal of the Civic Forum was to develop links between civil society activists and the government, not for the representatives of NGOs and NKO's to supplant the State Duma as the legitimate representative of the citizens of Russia. That was an important distinction to make, for it undercut any attempt on the part of the president to generate populist support or to co-opt third-sector groups into a loyal state apparatus. Thus there would be no elections of any kind and no appointment of any kind of representative organ at the forum. The idea, the People's Assembly stressed, was to introduce government authorities to the experts and the resources of Russia's growing civil society so that an ensuing partnership

could help address Russia's social, political, and economic problems.<sup>81</sup>

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***“Civil society groups in post-communist Russia have continually called for accountability on the part of government officials for their decisions.”***

The organizational committee of the Civic Forum was composed of eighty-one members, including representatives of NGOs and NKO's throughout Russia (among them, A. B. Roginsky of Memorial, Ella Pamfilova of Civic Dignity, Oleg Zykov of No to Alcohol

and Drugs, and V. D. Mel'nikova of the Committee for Soldiers' Mothers) and government officials, including E. Gontmakher, head of the Department of Social Development in the government, and V. I. Matvienko, a vice premier of the government.<sup>82</sup> Gontmakher stressed that the main aim of the forum was “to regulate an equal partnership that is necessary for both society and the state” and to “gain an ally in civil society which could advance reforms.” Gleb Pavlovsky, leader of the Fund for Effective Politics, noted that the forum should help make the structures of civil society more active because “we don't need a society of spectators but a society which actively works.” Ella Pamfilova, of Civic Dignity, criticized those human rights organizations that refused on principle to engage in any dialogue with state authorities, arguing that “a constructive and equal partnership with authorities is proper in every normal democratic country.”<sup>83</sup>

A smaller working group was created from within the organizational committee, consisting of twenty-one members, including Nina Beliaeva, president of Interlegal, Pamfilova, Roginsky, political scientist Sergei A. Markov, and Mikhail B. Margelov, vice chair of the Committee on International Affairs of the Council of the Federation.<sup>84</sup> By some accounts, there was a frenzy of activity as local and regional committees hastily formed; by 10 October 2001, sixty-one of the eighty-nine subjects of the Russian Federation had formally created committees, submitted their protocols, and set dates for conferences to plan their input into the Civic Forum.<sup>85</sup>

Oleg Zykov, head of NAN, cochair of the Moscow regional organizational committee, and member of the federal organizing committee, made it clear that

civil society activists had high expectations of the working group of the federal organizing committee of the Civic Forum and wanted its members to take full responsibility for the efficacious participation of activists at the forum. Fully aware that Putin and the government could well be planning to co-opt the third sector and render it organizationally and politically subservient to the Presidential Administration or the government, Zykov articulated two demands to the working group. The first demand was to organize the forum effectively and to produce genuine policy discussions. That would include a national discussion about Russian problems that so far had no resolution in sight, roundtables composed of civil society representatives and state authorities to discuss approaches to the problems, and a "public arena" where relevant documents, programs of action, draft laws, and other information would be available and open to debate and discussion by the wider public.<sup>86</sup>

The second demand of the Moscow organizing committee was that organizational matters be decided before the forum started, again to preclude any domination by state authorities of the discussion and decisions made at the forum.<sup>87</sup> If these demands were not met, warned Zykov, and the forum was not successful, it would be a "personal failure" for the members of the working group. They bore individual responsibility, he asserted, for the fate of the Civic Forum and would not be able to hide behind the "fig leaf" of the organizational committee should the forum fail to strengthen the interests of civil society.<sup>88</sup> The admonition is significant. In the past, civil society activists have felt collectively suffocated or ignored by an assertive yet ineffective state and considered state officials responsible for the inhibition of independent activism. For civil society activists to levy responsibility for the outcome of the Civic Forum on other activists indicates both a new sense of empowerment on the part of third-sector activists and an assumption that activists have the resources, however limited, to be accountable for their own fate. Civil society groups in postcommunist Russia have continually called for accountability on the part of government officials for their decisions; directing that same demand to their own representatives indicates the high stakes involved for civil society activists in the Civic Forum. Also crucial to third-sector activists going into the forum was transparency in financing, information, organization, and decision-making, both to educate the public about developments in civil society and to prevent the government from using the forum for its own ends.<sup>89</sup>

Civil society activists clearly wanted the forum to be a working meeting that put government officials together with civil society activists, business leaders, and media representatives. They demanded a decentralized format that created working groups that would stay in place after the forum to help identify and address social problems. Thus, they wanted "no presidium at the Forum, no voting on any issues, and no general resolutions."<sup>90</sup> Rather, they demanded a series of roundtables on Russia's most pressing issues and working groups to develop strategies to help solve problems and carry through reforms.<sup>91</sup> Their idea was to develop a group of independent experts in civil society to work with government agencies and to prevent any bureaucratization of the relationship between independent

groups and organs of state power.<sup>92</sup> Learning from their experience at the local and regional levels, where officials initially attempted to co-opt third-sector groups and put them safely under the control of the government administration, activists are determined not to let this happen at the national level.

Although critical of the lack of time to properly prepare for the forum and the lack of clarity regarding the forum's organization, civil society activists recognize that an important step in the consolidation of civil society occurred with the forum: public recognition and legitimation of civil society in the eyes of government officials. The aforementioned head of the government Department on Social Development, E. Gontmakher, for example, "reiterated five or six years ago that it was never possible to trust social organizations, because they are capable only of stupidly spending—even pilfering—state money. Yet today he is the one responsible for marshaling connections with those very NGOs/NKOs."<sup>93</sup> Regardless of the motivations of the president or government officials, civil society activists are optimistic that the forum—its preparation and outcome—has heralded a new era in the establishment of a Russian civil society. State officials are compelled to recognize its existence and the activity of its members and will come to appreciate its pool of independent experts who can help the government address Russia's most pressing problems.<sup>94</sup>

Civil society activists organized the participation of NGOs and NKOs in the frenzied run-up to the forum, and about four thousand representatives of the groups participated in the two-day meeting. The activists influenced the organization of the event according to the demands noted above. On the first day, twenty-one large discussion groups (with up to three hundred participants) formed; their topics included local self-government, social policies, nationality policies, guarantee of individual rights in legal process, military reform, educational reform, a "social contract" among civil society groups, business, and government, women's role in the democratization process, and the status of Chechnya.<sup>95</sup> The next day, the discussion groups were pared down to smaller roundtable groups, which then broke up into policy groups of about fifteen representatives of NGOs/NKOs and top government officials, including members of the cabinet.<sup>96</sup> The policy groups will continue to meet, thereby establishing regular links between the government and NGO/NKO specialists.

Liudmila Alekseeva, leader of the Moscow Helsinki Group, opened the forum by noting the importance of the state and an independent society working together as partners.<sup>97</sup> For his part, President Putin, who followed Alekseeva, said all the right things to the assembled participants from the point of view of those advocating an effective, independent civil society. He talked about the "necessity of a dialogue and partnership between the state and civil society." He acknowledged that, in the days leading up to the forum, many critics contended that the state was trying to get civil society under its thumb and to control its activities. He argued that this was not the case, that it would be unproductive, indeed, impossible, to try to create civil society "from above." Civil society must be independent and strong, he said, for "there cannot be a strong democratic state in the context of a weak society." A strong civil society also "prevents marginalization and extremism in

Russian society.” Putin recognized the diversity of the independent groups whose representatives he was addressing, their “different goals and expectations from the government, and the fact that many vehemently oppose the state on principle on questions of government policies.” This, the president assured his audience, is not only normal but necessary for the healthy functioning of democracy. He recognized that it is up to the representatives of the state—not just individuals but state authorities as a group—to engage civil society activists in dialogue. The biggest task that lay ahead, Putin said, is to avoid the bureaucratization of initiatives and to establish the institutions and processes necessary to strengthen civil society.<sup>98</sup>

Whether his words are only window dressing or a particularly disingenuous way of disarming Russia’s budding civil society, Putin is on record as recognizing the autonomy, diversity, and policymaking potential of Russia’s NGOs and NKO. He has enjoined the cabinet, government officials, and regional leaders—once dismissive or highly critical of NGO and NKO activity—to both promote the activity of and develop a partnership with civil society activists. Putin’s self-proclaimed goals are twofold: to promote democratization and to engage civil society activists in the daunting task of tackling Russia’s serious social problems.

After the forum, activists were cautious and wary, yet generally optimistic about the potential of the forum to usher in a new era in Russia’s state-society relationship. Though Yabloko—Russia’s socially minded liberal party—dismissed the Civic Forum out of hand as meaningless public relations,<sup>99</sup> Memorial Society chairman Arseny Roginsky proved more willing to seriously assess the results of the forum. “It would be naïve,” he answered in response to a reporter’s question, “to say that the state and civil society are ready today for a continuous and equitable interaction.”<sup>100</sup> He acknowledged that the commissions and councils created at the forum could “easily turn into silent appendages of the state,” or that they could be put under patrimonial rule of some ambitious civil society leader trying to make a name for himself and monopolizing any dialogue with state officials. He also recognized that not all NGOs and NKOs are capable of assuming the responsibility necessary to engage in effective policymaking.

Roginsky also knows that it will take a long time to change the mentality of government officials: “Half of the officials only several weeks ago were completely unaware of the existence of such social organizations, and several of these organizations consider themselves to be exclusively clients of the government as a distributor of various goods.” It will be difficult to have representatives of the two groups engage in a policymaking dialogue as equal partners. Nonetheless, he ventures, the forum went a long way toward inculcating values and expectations of equal partnership, cooperation, and pooling of resources. If the state is a vertical hierarchy of power, says Roginsky, civil society will meet it with “our horizontal.” As an example, he warns that regional governors may try to create a chamber of civil society groups and attach it to the regional administration, thereby subordinating it to the authority of the governor. To avoid this, NGOs and NKOs need to establish policymaking forums with regional officials based on specific policies, thus creating a series of issue-driven NGO-government partnerships, as they had done in various cities and oblasts by creating policy-oriented social-gov-

ernment councils. In that way, civil society creates horizontal links to strengthen its influence and prevent a centralization of power. In the wake of the Civic Forum, third-sector activists believe that a "new phase" of relations between government officials and civil society activists has emerged at all levels. Follow-up conferences with local government officials, NGO representatives, the mass media, and forum participants took place throughout Russia in the wake of the November 2001 meeting, in Krasnodar, Novosibirsk, Omsk, and Irkutsk, among others.<sup>101</sup>

Only concrete actions will bring Putin's promising words to life, and Russian activists have reason to be wary. Yet wariness or outright dismissal is clearly not enough. Civil society activists must make the most of every opportunity they get to expand their influence. The forum was a significant step in that process. Even commentators critical of the government's motivations acknowledged that the concerted effort on the part of civil society activists had made the forum more effective than envisioned by Putin and the government and had given Russia's third sector the chance to apply the lessons learned from their local and regional experience to enlivening civil society at the federal level.<sup>102</sup>

### **Conclusion: Strong State, Strong Society**

Civil society development in postcommunist Russia has been halting, slow, and inhibited by many obstacles. Yet in the last decade, tentative steps have been made by independent activists to establish a foundation for their activities at the local and regional levels. Although not developed enough to counter formidable executive power structures, a variety of independent groups have carved out a meaningful, if limited, role for themselves in public life, in executive power structures, and in legislative committees. It is still too early to talk of a Russian civil society or an equal partnership between the Russian state and independent activists, but an autonomous "third sector" has made it into the lexicon of state officials, the public at large, and scholars, who are using Russian civil society as a variable to explain local social organization, levels of democratization, and the connection between independent activism and a free enterprise.<sup>103</sup>

The future development of Russian civil society will be connected with a strong and effective state.<sup>104</sup> During the first decade of Russian postcommunism, the effectiveness of the federal state was consistently eroded by power struggles between the executive and legislative branches, the influence of regional elites, a federalization process based on unilateral treaties with the republics, the emergence of financial oligarchs who tried to capture state power, and the ubiquitous influence of the mafia, which helped to undermine tax collection and law enforcement. The postcommunist Russian state was ill equipped to deal with the Pandora's box of crises opened by the transition process. Many Russian and Western observers now argue that, in addition to the technical weaknesses of the postcommunist Russian state, the Western liberal model of the state's retreat from the economy and society in postcommunist Russia, promulgated by shock-therapy activists and Western funding organizations, was ill conceived and downright dangerous, for it allowed undemocratic social forces to take control of economic and social processes.<sup>105</sup>

Russian activists tend to agree and subscribe to the neoliberal model practiced in most of Europe, with its state involvement in economic planning and mediation of social problems. Russian civil society, its activists argue, will not be served by a weak or uninvolved state; only the state can level the social playing field and marshal the resources necessary to keep regional leaders, oligarchs, and the mafia in check so that citizens are free to pursue their individual interests and work toward a common good. Third-sector activists have neither the resources nor the authority to pursue their goals; they need allies in the state to give them access and influence over policymaking and to fight the countervailing influence of deviant social forces. Putin's attempts to rein in the regional governors, reorganize the federal administrative system, cut off the power of the oligarchs, and curtail the mafia are thus more likely to be viewed with cautious optimism by Russians, who see the need for order as a prerequisite for democracy, than by foreign observers, who focus on the authoritarian potential of Putin's policies.

Third-sector activists are especially aware of both the opportunities and dangers inherent in the model of a strong and activist state. The biggest opportunity for civil society in this model is engaging the state to address social problems and obtaining access to state resources toward that end. The biggest danger is the state's potential, afforded by the model, to silence all criticism of its officials and to co-opt Russia's third sector toward its own ends. The model of a strong and activist state, activists realize, must include a strong and well-organized society to keep the state itself in check according to the tenets of political liberalism. They are countering a vicious historical tendency toward suffocating state power, but they see the opportunity presented in the postcommunist period to establish a "strong society" in its democratic sense—one based on social self-organization according to well-defined interests (as opposed to populism), rule of law, and the ability to shape state power and government policies. Russian activists avoid the temptation to denounce the state, given its oppressive role throughout Russian history, and argue that the state can play a constructive role in social and economic development. At the same time they realize the need for a well-organized and influential society to temper the power of the state and hold its officials accountable. Third-sector activists seek to engage the state in supporting the constitution's vision of a Russian "social state" while retaining their independence and their right to constructively criticize the state's policies and the actions of its officials.

This "strong state—strong society" model of Russian democratization, as tenuous as it may seem given the tumultuous postcommunist transition, actually emerges from Russia's traditional political culture, in which the predominance of both *gosudarstvennost* and *sobornost* can put their stamp on Russia's halting transition toward liberal democracy. *Gosudarstvennost* is the tradition of state intervention into social and economic processes; Russian observers note that its impact on democratization resembles European neoliberalism, where the state intervenes or plays a strong mediating role in social life and the economy.<sup>106</sup> *Sobornost* is the Russian version of communitarianism, focused on consensus aimed at addressing social problems; its impact on the postcommunist democratization processes has produced support for "social liberalism," a combination of

the law-based rights and autonomy of a third sector and a commitment to care for the well-being and social needs of the community.<sup>107</sup>

The potential strengths of the “strong state–strong society” model are also its greatest potential weaknesses. There is no guarantee that a strong Russian state will espouse the values or pursue the goals of a liberal democracy. Russia’s third sector is still in no position to hold state leaders accountable to legal or behavioral democratic standards. The “social liberalism” that characterizes third-sector activity could easily devolve into a “leveling collectivism” that calls up the spirit of the Soviet past, with its popular mentality of entitlement in the absence of effective participation in social and political processes. And absent from the model, understandably in light of Russia’s political history, is a clear role for a mainstay of modern liberal and neoliberal politics: political parties.

The missing link in the political model envisioned by Putin and third-sector activists, as will be obvious by now, is an effective political party system. The only way that civil society can establish itself as a significant player in the democratization process, given Russia’s constitutional foundation as a presidential-parliamentary political system, is to forge long-term links with mass-based political parties that actually form governments and win or lose state and local power through fair elections. Scholars note that civil society works most effectively with legislatures and that more attention and funding must be directed toward political party development in postcommunist Russia.<sup>108</sup> Russian activists stress that they have no intention of supplanting legislative assemblies or political parties. Yet with no mass-based political parties, no hope in sight for a government formed by the dynamics of party politics, and little potential for the strengthening of the Federal Assembly, at least in the near future, third-sector activists have very little to grasp in the way of establishing links between civil society and a legislative system capable of directing government policy.<sup>109</sup> They have done all they can to work with legislative committees to draft and pass legislation that will institutionalize civil society and provide the tools necessary for its activists to pursue their interests. But until Russian political parties take ownership of the legislative process and form governments based on election results, third-sector groups will direct their energies toward the executive branch and its administrative arms as the most viable means of strengthening the third sector and influencing public policy. Third-sector activists in the last decade have established links between independent groups and local and regional administrations and created partnerships between the third sector and government officials at the local and regional levels. They have been moderately successful, as the evidence here shows.

Putin’s motives in sponsoring the November 2001 Civil Forum may well have been only to use third-sector activism toward his own ends, as his attempt to control the composition of the forum while at the same time undermining third-sector cohesion illustrates. But Russia’s third-sector activists have developed strategies to prevent co-optation into a vertical hierarchy of state power. They may not have the ability to hold the president and his officials accountable to democratic standards but they do have the wherewithal to define and protect their autonomy and play Putin’s game on their own terms. This may not be a great leap forward



in the democratization process, but it is a step, no matter how small, toward empowering “society” as it is courted by the “state.” Much will depend on how capable third-sector activists are at exploiting the opportunity afforded by Putin and using what little leverage they have to consolidate the gains made at the Civil Forum. Two factors are beyond their control: the intent of the president, with the weight of the executive apparatus behind him, and support from the Russian masses, who have been caught between the two extreme poles of “a new hope for the future” and an “ironic detachment.”<sup>110</sup>

Robert Sharlet has argued recently that “[a]fter a year of vigorous campaigning at the center and on the periphery, Putin began the integration of the state with the society that it governs, reasserting the authority of the Constitution and the law as the framework for order and freedom.”<sup>111</sup> The state, with its vertical structure of power relationships, will continue to promote order using whatever means available within existing legal boundaries, which are still ambiguous enough to allow for authoritarian measures. Russia’s emerging civil society, with its horizontal structure of organizations and issue-oriented activities, will be one of the most important advocates of the “freedom” part of the equation. If the consolidation of democracy is the goal, order and freedom go hand in hand, making the “partnership” model of state-society relations, despite its dangers, the most feasible course of action. The Russian state-society relationship cannot be viewed as a boxing match; it resembles, rather, a dance of two unequal partners. The state comes onto the floor taking a strong lead, for without it civil society wouldn’t be on the dance card. The potential for missteps is great. Yet the state requires some support, if only from a weaker partner, and civil society can take advantage of that. Russia’s budding civil society, if it consolidates its resources as it did for the Civic Forum, can steer Putin’s state, if ever so subtly, toward the president’s self-proclaimed goal of democratization.

#### NOTES

1. Alexander Verkhovsky, “Operation Civic Forum,” in *RFE/RL (Un)Civil Societies 2*, no. 30 (1 August 2001), comp. Catherine Cosman, on-line publication at <<http://www.rferl/org>>.

2. Dmitry Pinsker, “Kremlin Tames Civil Society,” *Russia Journal*, 16–22 November 2001, <<http://www.russijournal.com/printer/weekly5430.html>>. See also Anne Leahy, “Putin’s Russia,” *International Journal* 55, no. 4 (autumn 2000): 641, where the author refers to a purported leaked proposal from the president’s office to create a council in the presidential administration “with an open mandate to satisfy the ‘need to look democratic,’ and a secret one to neutralize any opposition.”

3. Vladimir Tikhomirov, “Grazhdanskii Forum predlozhit novuiu model’” *Nezavisimaia Gazeta*, 12 December 2001, <<http://www.civilforum.ru/media/841.html>>.

4. I. V. Nagdasev, “Grazhdanskoe obshchestvo i grazhdanskoe obrazovanie,” in B. V. Mikhailov, *Grazhdanskoe obshchestvo i perspektivy v Rossii* (Moscow: Rossiiskii nauchnyi fond, 1994), 33–42. The debate continues in both the Russian and Western literature about the distinction between liberal and communal forms of social organization as a foundation for building civil society in Russia. See James L. Gibson, “Social Networks, Civil Society, and the Prospects for Consolidating Russia’s Democratic Transition,” *American Journal of Political Science* 45, no. 1 (January 2001): 51–69; and Mikko Lagerspetz, “From ‘Parallel Polis’ to ‘The Time of the Tribes’: Post-Socialism, Social Self-Organization and Post-Moder-

nity," *Journal of Communist Studies and Transition Politics* 17, no. 2 (June 2001): 1–18. For a discussion of the difference between liberal social organization and *sobornost* as the foundation for Russian civil society development, see "Beseda pervaiia: o filosofii grazhdanskogo obshchestva . . ." in S. V. Borisov and V. V. Sarychev, *Tretii Sektor' Nizhegorodskoi Oblasti: Fakti i Raxmyshleniia* (Nizhnii Novgorod: Interlial, 1997), 18–22.

5. Iu. A. Krasin and A. Galkin, "Grazhdanskoe obshchestvo: put' k stabilnosti," *Dialog* 3 (February 1992): 73. For a detailed review of Russian approaches to civil society development see Marcia A. Weigle, *Russia's Liberal Project: State-Society Relations in the Transition from Communism* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2000), 333–79.

6. S. V. Borisov and V. V. Sarychev, "Beseda vtoriiia: o 'tret'em sektore' na 'poligone reform. . .,'" in Borisov and Sarychev, *Tretii Sektor' Nizhegorodskoi Oblasti*, 30–31.

7. Iu. Abramov, "Mezhu gosudarstvom i grazhdanskim obshchestvom: rol' politicheskikh partii," in Mikhailov, *Grazhdanskoe obshchestvo i perspektivy v Rossii*, 43–51.

8. A. A. Ignat'ev and B. V. Mikhailov, "Grazhdanskoe obshchestvo i perspektivy demokratii v Rossii," in Mikhailov, *Grazhdanskoe obshchestvo i perspektivy v Rossii*, 18.

9. G. Saratov, *Rossiiskaia gazeta*, 10 January 1994, cited in *Third Sector* 1 (January 1994): 7.

10. N. F. Tutsenko, "Kazach'e dvizhenie Kubani: na puti k grazhdanskomy obshchestvu," *Politicheskaia sotsiologiia* 27, no. 2 (2001): 37.

11. O. V. Zykov and N. L. Khananashvili, *Sotsial'nyi zakaz – osnova sotsial'nogo partnerstva*, (Moscow: Net Alkogolizmu i Narkomanii, n.d.), 4.

12. V. V. Kolbanovskiy, "Osnovnye funktsii grazhdanskogo obshchestva," in Z. T. Golenkova, *Problemy formirovaniia grazhdanskogo obshchestva* (Moscow: Rossiiskaia Akademiia Nauk, 1993), 32.

13. Natalia Stupakova, "Chtoby vyzhit' dostoino—naidi sebiiia," *Tretii sektor v Sibiri* 1 (January 1996): 1–2.

14. Ignat'ev and Mikhailov, "Grazhdanskoe obshchestvo i perspektivy demokratii v Rossii," 28.

15. V. A. Lebedev, ed., "Obshchestvenniia palata Kemerovskoi oblasti—institut formirovaniia grazhdanskogo obshchestva," in *Stanovlenie grazhdanskogo obshchestva: vozmozhnosti, problemy, perspektivy (na primere Kuzbassa)*, ed. V. A. Lebedev (Kemerovo: Obshchestvenniia palata Kemerovskoi oblasti, Kuzbasskii Tsentr "Initsiativa," 1998), 31.

16. Borisov and Sarychev, *Tretii Sektor' Nizhegorodskoi Oblasti*, 4.

17. James Richter, "Promoting Activism or Professionalism in Russia's Civil Society?" Program on New Approaches to Russian Security, Policy Memo Series 51, ed. Erin Powers, <<http://www.fas.harvard.edu/~ponars/Policy%20MEMOS/richter/51.html>>.

18. Michael Bernhard, "Civil Society after the First Transition: Dilemmas of Post-Communist Democratization in Poland and Beyond," *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 29, no. 3 (1996): 322.

19. Ignat'ev and Mikhailov, "Grazhdanskoe obshchestvo i perspektivy demokratii v Rossii," 26–28.

20. Kathleen E. Smith, *Remembering Stalin's Victims* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996), 192–93; Jane Dawson, *Eco-Nationalism: Anti-Nuclear Activism and National Identity in Russia, Lithuania, and Ukraine* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996), 167.

21. Borisov and Sarychev, "Beseda vtoriiia: O 'tret'em sektore' na 'poligone reform,'" 7, 30.

22. For a list of groups and their dates of registration, see *Transboundary Environmental Information Agency, A Directory of Non-Government Environmental Organizations of St. Petersburg* (St. Petersburg: Notabene, 1998) and *The Post-Soviet Handbook: A Guide to Grassroots Organizations and Internet Resources*, rev. ed. (Seattle: Center for Civil Society International, in association with University of Washington Press, 1999).

23. Article 7, paragraph 1–2, 1993 Russian Constitution.

24. "Federal Law on Local Self-Government: Text," Foreign Broadcast Information Service, FBIS-SOV-95-183-S, 21 September 1995, 52.

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38. N. F. Tutsenko, "Kazach'e dvizhenie Kubani," 37.

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40. Lyudmila Alekseeva, quoted in *RFE/RL (Un) Civil Societies* 2, no. 47 (28 November 2001). See also interview with Alekseeva in Ol'ga Koleva, "Kak postroit' grazhdanskoe obshchestvo," *Vesti*, 17 October 2001, 1–3, <<http://vesti.ru/2001/10/17/1003339346.html>>.

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53. V. P. Kozlov, "Itogi razvitiia ekonomiki Kemerovskoi oblast v 1997 godu i puti vykhoda iz krizisa," in *Stanovlenie grazhdanskogo obshchestva*, 9–14.

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63. V. A. Lebedev, "Obshchestvennaia palata Kemerovskoi oblasti. . . ," in *Stanovlenie grazhdanskogo obshchestva*, 32.

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70. Vladimir Liubov, "Gosudarstvennyi sotsial'nye zakaz," *Gazeta kommercheskikh organizatsii* 4, no. 38 (April-May 1996): 1–23.

71. "NGO i vlasti: vzgliad drug na druga i na sebja," *Tretii sektor v Sibiri* 2–3 (February-March 1996), 10–11.

72. A copy of the entire draft law and commentary on it by NAN's N. Khananashvili is available at <<http://www.nan.ru>>.

73. Petr Aleksandrovich Khven', Nizhegorod legislative assembly deputy, interviewed in *Tretii Sektor' Nizhegorodskoi oblasti*, 69–72.

74. Borisov and Sarychev, eds., *Tretii Sektor' Nizhegorodskoi oblasti*, 6–9.

75. Pinsker, "Kremlin Tames Civil Society."

76. Georgy Satarov, "Russia's Government Launches Dialogue on Civil Society Issues," special to the *Russia Journal* 4, no. 24 (22–28 June 2001), <[www.russiajournal.com/printer/weekly4798.html](http://www.russiajournal.com/printer/weekly4798.html)>.

77. Pinsker, "Kremlin Tames Civil Society," 2.

78. Membership in the People's Assembly is not fixed. As of this writing, it consists of eight groups, including the Confederation of Consumer Societies, Memorial, the Socio-Ecological Union, the Fund for the Defense of Glasnost, and the Union of Journalists of Russia, among others. A full list of members is available at <<http://www.civitas.ru/we/1.html>>.

79. "O nas: Civitas.ru—proekt Narodnoi Assamblei," available at <<http://www.civitas.ru/we.html>>, no date.

80. "Pozitsiia Narodnoi Assamblei po voprosy Grazhdanskogo Forume," 2001, <<http://www.civitas.ru/we/4.html>>.

81. Ibid.

82. For a list of the entire organizational committee and their positions, see "Orgkomitet Grazhdanskogo Foruma," <<http://www.civilforum.ru/committee/201.html>>.

83. All of the quotes are taken from Nikolai Makarov, "V rabote grazhdanskogo foruma primut uchastie svyshe 4 tychechei predstavitelei obshchestvennykh ob'edinenii 12 vsekhn regionov Rossii," *RIA-Novosti*, 12 October 2001, <<http://www.civilforum.ru/media/328.html>>.

84. For the entire list of the working group of the organizational committee, see <<http://www.civilforum.ru/committee/198.html>>.

85. A list of all of the planning committees, leaders, and conference dates is available at <<http://www.nan.ru>>.

86. Oleg Zykov, "Obrashchenie k uchastnikom rabochei gruppy orgkomiteta Grazhdanskogo Foruma," <<http://www.nan.ru/gf.html>>, 1.

87. Ibid., 2

88. Ibid.

89. See interview with Boris Sheinis in Ol'ga Koleva, "Kak postroit' grazhdanskoe obshchestvo," *Vesti*, 17 October 2001, 9, <<http://vesti.ru/2001/10/17/1003339346.html>>.

90. Lyudmila Alekseeva, quoted in *RFE/RL (Un)Civil Societies* 2, no. 47 (28 November 2001).

91. "Pozitsiia Narodnoi Assamblei po voprosy Grazhdanskogo Forume," 1.

92. Khananashvili, "Grazhdanskii Forum. Piramida ili Giroscop?" 7.

93. Ibid., 1.

94. Ibid.

95. A complete list of groups and further details available at <[www.civilforum.ru/committee](http://www.civilforum.ru/committee)>.

96. *RFE/RL (Un)Civil Societies* 2, no. 47 (28 November 2001). See also "Putin izvinicia i pokinol Grazhdanskii forum," *Lenta.RU: v Rossii*, 21 November 2001, 1–3, <<http://lenta.ru/russia/2001/11/21/forum/>>.

97. Ibid.

98. For a full text of Putin's speech, see "Prezident Vladimir Putin poprivetstrovao uchastnikov Grazhdanskogo Foruma, nachavshegosia segodnia Kremlevskom dvortse," <<http://www.civilforum.ru/forum/openplenium/85321.html>>.

99. *RFE/RL (Un)Civil Societies* 2, no. 47 (28 November 2001).

100. Vladimir Tikhomirov, "Grazhdanskii Forum predlozhit novyiu model,'" *Nezavisimaia Gazeta*, 18 December 2001, <<http://www.civilforum.ru/media/841.html>>.

101. Agency for Social Information, 17 December 2001, <<http://www.asi.org.ru/asinfo/asinfo>>.

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104. The author would like to thank an anonymous reviewer for comments concerning the clarification of the argument in this section.

105. See, for example, the contributors to Lawrence R. Klein and Marshall Pomer, eds., *The New Russia: Transition Gone Awry* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001); and Peter Reddaway and Dmitri Glinski, *The Tragedy of Russia's Reforms: Market Bolshevism Against Democracy* (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace Press, 2001).

106. "Beseda pervaiia: o filosofii grazhdanskogo obshchestva. . . .," in 'Tretii Sektor' *Nizhegorodskoi Oblasti*, 28.

107. B. G. Kapustin and I. M. Kliamkin, "Liberal'nye tsennosti v soznanii Rossiian," parts 1 and 2, *Polis* 1 (1994): 68–92; 2 (1994): 39–75. For a review of liberal theory and Russian political culture, see Weigle, *Russia's Liberal Project*, 381–459.

108. Michael McFaul, *Russia's Unfinished Revolution: Political Change from Gorbachev to Putin* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001), 322.

109. Gordon M. Hahn, "Buttressing a Multiparty Democracy in Russian Regions," *Russia Journal* 5, no. 13 (12–18 April 2002): 1.

110. Leonid Grigoriev, "To a New Phase of Transformation," *Social Sciences* 32, no. 1 (winter 2001): 16; Boris Kapustin, "Russia as a Postmodern Society," *Dissent* (winter 2000): 20.

111. Robert Sharlet, "Putin and the Politics of Law in Russia," *Post-Soviet Affairs* 17, no. 3 (2001): 230.