

The First Steps of Russia's Public Chamber Representation or Coordination?

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Abstract: Russian President Vladimir Putin created the Public Chamber to institutionalize a civil society that would provide feedback to the state while remaining within the boundaries of legitimate conflict. Putin's critics predicted that the Public Chamber would be a Kremlin puppet. During the first few months of its functioning, however, chamber members proved to be bolder than those critics expected and did not hesitate to criticize some of the state's policies. The Public Chamber's dependence on the presidential administration for its status is both an asset and a source of restraint for the Public Chamber members.

Keywords: civil society, nongovernmental organizations, Public Chamber, Vladimir Putin, Russia

As president of Russia, Vladimir Putin made speeches containing many references to the importance of building a strong civil society. Yet, in light of his consistent efforts to centralize power, what is the nature of Putin's conception of civil society?¹ Most scholars of civil society view it as the sphere of organized social life that gives scope to Russian citizens' initiative and is relatively independent from the state.² In contrast to this notion, in April 2005, I argued that "Putin envisions a well-ordered civil society as a network of organizations that formally remain outside the boundaries of the state and provide needed representation for citizens' interests while also serving as part of the system of support for the structures of political authority."³ Inherent tension exists between the desire to maintain control over the framework within which social organizations operate and the hope that such organizations will effectively voice their members' demands.

Putin's speeches emphasize integrating civil society into the Russian executive branch's network of support for several years, but determined moves to translate that goal into reality began only in early 2004, and toward the end of his term, Putin's regime made progress

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fleshing out the structures of civil society in a form that Putin considers appropriate for Russia.⁴ A variety of political systems' experiences teach us that the meaning of any broad idea concerning the creation of new institutional structures may change in subtle ways during its implementation. Here, I examine the creation of the Public Chamber (OP), a new institution that was created to form the capstone of a corporatist quasi-civil society in Russia under Putin, and the actions it took during its first year. The OP has not resolved the tension between the apparently contradictory themes in Putin's design for civil society, emphasizing both the independence of social organizations and their dedication to the state's goals, and indeed, that tension has heightened as the most prominent institution introduced in pursuit of Putin's goals for civil society has taken on a life of its own in an ambiguous manner.

The Public Chamber: Proposal and Creation

It is possible to see the November 2001 Civic Forum held in Moscow as foreshadowing the OP. The Civic Forum brought together 5,000 representatives of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) to meet government officials. In John Squier's assessment, the Civic Forum's purpose was to integrate "civil society organizations throughout Russia into a single corporatist body that would allow them an official consultative role with the government."⁵ Complaints from many social organizations' leaders apparently discouraged the government from following through on that plan after the Civic Forum adjourned. The essential conception was not forgotten, however. Putin revived the idea in a speech he delivered in September 2004 after the Beslan school hostage crisis. Putin stressed the need to tighten the unity of the executive authority's chain of command in Russia, so that executive organs will "work as a single integrated organism with a clear structure of subordination." He also suggested creating a "public chamber" (*Obshchestvennaya palata*, which also might be translated as "social chamber") as a "platform for extensive dialogue, where citizens' initiatives could be presented and discussed in detail."⁶ In December 2004, Putin submitted the OP bill to the Duma—the lower house of the Russian parliament. In March 2005, the bill won final approval in both houses of the Federal Assembly. Putin signed the bill into law on April 4, 2005.⁷

The OP's selection of members reflected the intention of ensuring that the executive branch, in consultation with social organizations, would determine the OP's composition. There are 126 members of the chamber, and they were chosen in three stages.⁸ Putin selected the first forty-two members from various backgrounds in a September 30, 2005, decree.⁹ After discussion and voting in a meeting of the appointed members, the next forty-two *obshchestvenniki*, as OP members are often called, all came from NGOs and were elected on November 15.¹⁰ The eighty-four members chosen in the first two rounds picked the final forty-two members on December 23, after candidates had been advanced from the regional and federal districts.¹¹ The OP's composition was mixed. The largest group of members consisted of seventeen businessmen, while sixteen academics and twelve members from the realm of art and culture were selected. None of Russia's best-known human rights groups are represented in the chamber as none of those organizations' leaders sought to be included. Perhaps the most important feature of OP membership is that many of its members are very successful and well-known individuals who bring prestige to their roles in the chamber and pride themselves on possessing a degree of credibility in the eyes of average Russian citizens. In their first full session on January 22, 2006, the OP mem-

bers elected Yevgeny Velikhov, president of the Kurchatov Nuclear Research Institute, as their head (with the title of secretary) and selected Sergey Katyrin, vice president of the Russian Chamber of Commerce and Industry, as their deputy secretary.¹² At that session, the chamber formed seventeen commissions, each tasked with reviewing a major area of policy and legislation.

From the time that Putin proposed the OP's creation, many attempted to describe the role that it was likely to play. Putin's initial remarks on that body suggested it would be a forum for dialogue with the state, a place "where citizens' initiatives could be presented and discussed."¹³ Official sources expanded on that statement, affirming that the OP would be expected to provide expert consultation on legislative proposals introduced in the parliament and to monitor the operation of executive agencies.¹⁴ Preliminary assessments of the chamber's probable impact varied widely, however. In early 2005, the radio station Ekho Moskvy reported that some human rights activists had ridiculed the conception of the OP as "an attempt to create a dummy of a civil society."¹⁵ A year later, Nikolai Petrov of the Carnegie Endowment's Moscow Center dismissed the newly formed body as a "thoroughly domesticated element of civil society in bureaucratic form."¹⁶ Soon after Petrov's statement was published, a journalist reported that critics of the OP regarded it as "a smoke screen for the Kremlin's increasingly authoritarian trends" and quoted Igor Yakovenko, the head of the Russian Union of Journalists, as saying that the chamber served only as "the Kremlin's puppet theater."¹⁷ Critics of the government asserted that the new chamber would be a tame body controlled by the state authorities, which would serve merely to create the illusion of representation for civil society.

Others, such as Aleksandr Auzan, a professor at Moscow State University and the president of the Institute for the National Project "Social Contract," viewed the creation of the OP as an attempt by the political leadership to create a mechanism for feedback from society, since the communication had been "tragically severed" because of Putin's domination of the parliament. Auzan cautiously added that he would not attempt to forecast the OP's fate. He said that the new institution could be "a channel of feedback for the authorities," or "a new manipulative instrument" wielded by the state.¹⁸ Vladislav Surkov, a deputy head of the Putin administration who reportedly played a significant role in shaping the OP, saw the body as a means of "letting off steam," which he described as normal in any society.¹⁹ He hastened to add that the OP's main objective was to assemble "people who are enthusiastic about their work, who are advocates for various social groups in the broad sense of that word and actively work with the bureaucratic structures." Mikhail Rogozhnikov, the deputy director of the Institute of Social Planning and one of the OP bill's authors, reinforced the theme that Auzan emphasized by observing, "We understood that feedback between authority and society had been broken and that the new chamber should somehow fill in that gap."²⁰

The OP members quoted in the press depicted the role of that body in positive terms. Even before the selection of the members of that body was completed, Anatoly Kucherena, a member who was later elected to head one of the OP's commissions, asserted that the chamber had already proved "not only that it is completely independent of the existing branches of the government, but also that it can defend the public interest effectively and serve as an instrument of dialogue between the government and the public."²¹ After he was chosen as OP secretary, Velikhov, an academician, voiced his expectations, which stressed the importance of cooperation with the state: "The motto of the chamber's work should be

not confrontation with the authorities, but active work with them, in order to make Russian citizens more interested in the country's destiny."²² In the light of such contrasting assessments, the OP's actual role remained to be determined by its actions.

The Public Chamber in Action: Its First Steps

The OP has only been functioning since January 2006, so any firm conclusion about its character would be premature. However, the OP's first actions showed more boldness and independence than critics of the body predicted. Even before the final group of members had been selected and before the first full meeting of that body was convened, some members took the first step toward shaping the OP's role. On November 8, 2005, deputies of four factions introduced a bill in the Duma intended to change the regulation of NGOs. Some of the most prominent OP members, including Velikhov and Dr. Leonid Roshal, asked Duma Chairman Boris Gryzlov to postpone consideration of the proposed legislation until after the OP had met in January so that the new body could scrutinize the legislation.²³ On December 3, 2005, Yelena Zelinskaya, the vice president of Media Union (the mass media workers' union) and an OP member, announced that the eighty-four people who had been selected for the chamber had unanimously adopted an appeal to the Duma to postpone voting on the bill on NGOs.²⁴

This position placed the members of the chamber firmly on the side of those protesting the legislation, including the human rights organizations that were most critical of the government and who wanted no part of the OP.²⁵ Members of the nascent chamber also aligned themselves with human rights advocates such as Vladimir Lukin (Russia's human rights commissioner, or ombudsman) and Ella Pamfilova (the chairwoman of the Commission on Assistance for Human Rights and the Development of Civil Society Institutions of the President of Russia), whose relationships with the presidency were a mixture of dependence and independence, but who had been outspoken in their criticism of some aspects of the proposed legislation. After the bill was passed by the Duma, which did not wait until the OP was assembled before taking that action, the OP members requested that the Council of the Federation (the upper house of the parliament) and Putin delay making a decision on the legislation until the OP had a chance to consider it.²⁶ That request was ignored.

Some OP members did not let go of the issue even after the bill was signed into law. When the OP held its first full session on January 22, 2006, Kucherena gave a speech right after Putin, who was present during the session, and insisted that the chamber could still demand a revision of the new legislation on NGOs if "we are convinced that this law hinders the development of civil society."²⁷ The body chose Kucherena to head the OP's Commission on Public Supervision of Law Enforcement Organs and Reform of the Judicial-Legal System that day. During the same session, with Putin sitting nearby, Roshal, a renowned pediatrician, characterized the adoption of the legislation on NGOs without consultation of the OP as a "gross political error [*grubaya politicheskaya oshibka*] . . . above all of the Duma."²⁸ Two days later, in the OP's first official press conference, Velikhov and Kucherena continued to express reservations about the new law on NGOs, complaining that it would not make life simpler for social organizations and, in some ways, it would make things more complicated for them. They added that their chamber's task would be to monitor the enforcement of that legislation to make sure that it would not make it more difficult for NGOs to operate.²⁹ One reason for the OP members' vocal

dissatisfaction was that their institution had been bypassed in the process of adopting legislation that was intended to affect civil society. What may most be remembered about the incident, however, is that OP members showed no hesitation in associating themselves with independent critics of the parliament, though the OP's *obshchestvenniki* refrained from direct criticism of the president or the presidential administration's members.

Almost immediately after the OP officially was formed, it began to conflict with other institutions, especially the Duma. Those conflicts tested the boundaries of the institutions' authority, a particularly sensitive point because each of the other institutions had already been established and acclimated to a certain mode of functioning before the OP was created. The Duma

is increasingly viewed with less respect in Russia; many commentators dismiss it as almost a rubber-stamp body. It had a rather poor image even before the OP was created. Accordingly, a number of sensitive issues were raised when, for the first time on February 1, 2006, Velikhov visited the Duma to talk with Gryzlov. Velikhov said that members of his chamber should be able to attend the meetings of all committees in the Duma, but while Gryzlov did not reject that possibility, he mentioned that the Duma already had its own "apparatus of experts" who were

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able to evaluate draft laws without any outside help, clearly implying that the services of the OP would be superfluous.³⁰ Velikhov did not back off, however, and Gryzlov finally agreed to allow OP members to work with deputies to formulate a list of priorities for legislation and procedures of interaction. Oleg Kovalev, chair of the Duma's Rules Committee, announced that OP members would have access to the lower house of the parliament's computer network, and that the *obshchestvenniki* of the chamber would be allowed to take part in the work of the Duma's committees and even in its plenary sessions.³¹

After Kovalev's committee presented its revisions in the rules of the Duma and the OP's rules commission reviewed them, the rules commission's chair, Vladimir Fedosov, said with some satisfaction, "The Duma met us halfway."³² Nevertheless, it was reported that there were still numerous restrictions on access to the facilities and proceedings of the Duma for OP members. Duma member Gasan Mirzoev commented that many of the Duma's deputies "have a very jealous attitude toward the members of the OP."³³ On February 21, Kovalev suddenly canceled a press conference that had been scheduled to announce the Duma's change in rules, although he declined to give an explanation to reporters. One journalistic source said that the press conference had been canceled because the OP and the Duma still had not been able to agree on some questions.³⁴ United Russia deputies, who represent a majority in the Duma, allegedly objected to the request that members of the OP be allowed to see bills in the stage of "zero reading"—that is, before they are formally introduced in the lower house. Although the Duma and the OP compromised in a March 2, 2006, agreement, that right still was not extended to the members of the OP.³⁵

It also was evident that issues arose concerning jurisdiction between the OP and some executive organs. On February 22, 2006, three OP commission heads visited the Ministry

of Culture, at the invitation of Minister Aleksandr Sokolov, to discuss questions concerning bilateral cooperation.³⁶ Sokolov was the first government minister to suggest such consultation, but each commission of the OP is now “attached” to a ministry with the intent of offering advice and feedback to their respective ministries. The *obshchestvenniki* who visited the Ministry of Culture made it clear that one of their objectives was to seek financial support for key projects. The dialogue between Velikhov, the OP secretary, and Sergey Stepashin, the chair of the Accounting Chamber (SP), was cordial, and their discussion resulted in an agreement on cooperation between the OP and the SP.³⁷ Natalya Kostenko’s article in *Nezavisimaya gazeta* revealed that the conversation between Velikhov and Stepashin followed a large number of meetings by OP commission heads and the leaders of state structures. Kostenko commented that on the whole, “evidently the *gosudarstvenniki* (state officials) still are not ready for similar deepening of relations with the *obshchestvenniki*.”³⁸ We must also wonder about the relationships between the OP and the Commission on Assistance for Human Rights and the Development of Civil Society Institutions of the President of Russia, headed by Pamfilova, and between the OP and Lukin. In principle, the new OP is moving into the territory of each of those bodies, yet it is possible that the efforts of each of those entities may reinforce the efforts of the others.

When OP leaders encountered uncooperative officials in preexisting organs, the *obshchestvenniki* always had the ability to cloak themselves in Putin’s authority. They obviously felt considerable clout could be derived from the fact that Putin proposed the creation of the OP and publicly attached much importance to its functioning. That point was constantly implicit in Velikhov’s statements and was evoked explicitly by chamber member Sergey Markov, who has served as a political consultant for the government, when he said, “The Public Chamber is an organ of the president, and not of the bureaucracy.”³⁹ Lev Ponomarev, the head of an organization called For Human Rights, recognized this when he endorsed a statement by the OP leaders and said that he viewed the position taken by the chamber as “a signal directly from Vladimir Putin.”⁴⁰ When Velikhov held his fateful meeting with Gryzlov, he reminded the skeptical Gryzlov of the president’s statement that the new chamber “should express its opinion even in the stage of preparation of drafts of legislation.”⁴¹ The leaders of the Duma and other state bodies could also argue that their authority was endorsed by the presidency, but they should have realized that if their performance had been satisfactory, Putin would not have suggested the OP’s creation.

However, this dependence on presidential authority also creates the potential for the OP to become subservient to the chief executive’s direction, especially since Putin appointed one-third of the members, and those members took part in selecting the other members. One cannot yet assess the consequences for the OP of Dmitry Medvedev’s ascension to the presidency and Putin’s moving into the role of prime minister. Putin refrained from giving specific instructions to the OP on issues, at least publicly. He must have realized the new entity would be likely to have a mixed relationship with the state organs, a relationship that would be partly cooperative and partly adversarial. Velikhov has shown a sense of the importance of maintaining a delicate balance in that relationship. Such constraints suggest that OP members must observe distinct limits on their criticism of the state’s actions and refrain from challenging the president’s essential values. Velikhov admitted that “we will definitely argue with the authorities and indeed we are already arguing, but we will not seek to overthrow the government.”⁴² The OP has no power to approve laws or issue executive decrees; it can only present information and make recommendations.

Although those constraints limit its authority, they also allow it to pressure decision makers without having direct responsibility for any policies.

The Sychov Case

The first well-publicized case that the OP took up was an instance of *dedovshchina*, or the bullying of army recruits by more senior enlisted men, which in some cases constitutes extreme abuse. The phenomenon is common knowledge in Russia. Recruit Andrei Sychov was tortured in an instance of extraordinary sadism at the Chelyabinsk Tank School. The incident became a major story in the Russian media in January 2006. On New Year's Eve, December 31, 2005, higher-ranking enlisted men forced the nineteen-year-old Sychov to crouch for a long time and kicked him repeatedly. (The assailants reportedly had been drinking heavily.) High-ranking officers who knew about the incident hushed it up for weeks; when it became public knowledge, Sergey Ivanov, the minister of defense, said to the reporter who asked him about it, "There is nothing serious now, otherwise I would have known about it."⁴³ Media commentators voiced indignation, and protestors gathered outside the Defense Ministry demanding that Ivanov be fired. On the day after his first statement, Ivanov condemned the incident that left Sychov in critical condition as "shameful" and sent the commander of Russia's ground forces to Chelyabinsk to investigate. Major General Viktor Sidorov, the director of the tank school, was relieved of his duties and discharged from military service, and a criminal inquiry into his possible "abuse of official powers" was opened.⁴⁴

The OP wasted no time in getting involved in the case. When the OP Council met for the first time on January 30, 2006, it announced that Kucherena, the head of the chamber's Commission on the Public Supervision of Law Enforcement Organs and Force-Wielding Structures and Reform of the Judicial-Legal System, had been sent to Chelyabinsk to investigate the situation. The council had directed his commission and the Defense Ministry to set up a joint working group to gather information and make recommendations on the means of addressing the violent mistreatment of recruits in the armed forces.⁴⁵ Nikolai Svanidze, a well-known television broadcaster and member of the OP's Commission on Communications, Information Policy, and the Mass Media, and Aleksandr Afonichev, another OP member, accompanied Kucherena on his trip to Chelyabinsk. Evidently, the OP representatives gained full access to enlisted personnel, officers in the tank school, and officers of the military prosecutor's office who were also investigating the incident. The enlisted men and officers at the tank school initially denied that there had been any abuse, despite ample medical evidence to the contrary.⁴⁶ When journalists interviewed him after his return to Moscow, Kucherena expressed shock over Sychov's condition and bitterly denounced the practice of concealing hazing incidents in the military, but he was careful to affirm that the defense minister and the Defense Ministry were "interested in fighting this awful disease" of sadism in the military.⁴⁷

On February 4, 2006, the OP's law enforcement commission met for the first time. The session's main topic was the problem of *dedovshchina* in the army.⁴⁸ Svanidze suggested that *dedovshchina* might be a part of the standard policy for maintaining discipline in the Russian army, implying a systemic cause of the problem, which the Defense Ministry had been reluctant to admit. It was announced that the law enforcement commission had created a working group that included representatives of the OP, the Duma, the Defense

Ministry, the President's Council on Human Rights, and the Committee of Soldiers' Mothers, an organization that is dedicated to protecting the rights of recruits in the military. The inclusion of the Committee of Soldiers' Mothers representatives was surprising, because that organization had been very critical of the military and the Defense Ministry viewed it with some hostility. Pamfilova had been informed at the last minute of the opportunity to take part in the working group, and Valentina Melnikova, the chair of the Union of the Committees of Soldiers' Mothers, heard of the invitation only from some of the union's members, who learned of it from the news media.

On February 15, 2006, Ivanov delivered a report to the Duma on "The State of Military Discipline in the Armed Forces and Measures to Strengthen It."⁴⁹ In explaining the causes of the problem of *dedovshchina* in the military, Ivanov ascribed the greater part of the blame to the larger society, saying that such cruelty stemmed from "the moral pathology of society as a whole." He also denied that Russia's armed forces were in a crisis and decried the antimilitary feeling allegedly stirred up by "the efforts of a few zealots."⁵⁰ Ivanov announced some significant changes, however, though those did not extend to some of the more radical reforms he had advocated. He promised that the procedures for reporting incidents and disciplining offenders in the military would be improved, and he called for extra funding to make it possible to create a corps of professional, volunteer, noncommissioned officers. He also disclosed that the Defense Ministry was preparing a proposal to create a military police force and that military service for conscripts would be reduced from two years to one, starting in 2008. On April 15, 2006, Deputy Defense Minister Pankov reported to the OP on steps taken to address the problem of sadism against junior draftees.⁵¹ Pankov said that contract-based officers would replace conscripted officers after 2008. The OP supported a proposal to raise the conscription age from eighteen to twenty. (Lukin had originally suggested that idea.) The Defense Ministry was not ready to endorse the idea of abolishing the draft altogether, however, since that step would require a greater increase in budgeted funds than the government was willing to request. On the whole, the OP showed a positive reaction to the position the Defense Ministry had adopted.

On September 26, a military court in Chelyabinsk convicted Junior Sergeant Aleksandr Sivyakov on five charges related to Sychov's abuse and sentenced Sivyakov to four years, less time served, in a medium-security penal colony.⁵² Two codefendants in the case, each with the rank of private, were given suspended sentences. Sychov's family members, Melnikova, and the Union of Committees of Soldiers' Mothers were dismayed because Sivyakov had not received the maximum sentence for his crimes. Melnikova complained that the Sychov affair's handling showed that the situation in the armed forces had not changed.⁵³ *Gazeta.ru* suggested that the Sychov story was far from finished and reported that a "source close to the investigation" had said that the verdict in the Sivyakov case had opened the way for the procurator's office to prosecute other figures responsible for negligence in the Chelyabinsk Tank School. Unlike Melnikova, Lukin said that he was satisfied with the verdict against Sivyakov, because the important thing was that he had been found guilty, regardless of the length of his sentence.⁵⁴ Similarly, Kucherena declined to comment on whether the punishment was too soft or too harsh but assessed the imprisonment for Sivyakov as a "serious signal" to other soldiers about the potential consequences of bullying.⁵⁵ Apparently Lukin and Kucherena regarded any judicially imposed punishment for *dedovshchina* as sign of progress toward addressing that problem, which the military had consistently sought to cover up.

Housing Issues in Moscow

OP members played an even more prominent role in the public arena with their involvement in the controversy aroused by events in Moscow's South Butovo neighborhood. In the early 1930s, South Butovo had been a village on the outskirts of Moscow, but the city expanded greatly over time. The Moscow metropolitan government had recently made plans to tear down the small homes in that neighborhood to construct multistoried apartment buildings.⁵⁶ The city government offered the residents of South Butovo the opportunity to move into apartments in buildings not far away. Some residents accepted that offer, but others refused, contending that the government failed to offer adequate compensation for the dwellings and land that they were being asked to give up. The city was able to obtain a court order directing the remaining residents to resettle.

On June 19, 2006, regular police officers and a detachment of riot police accompanied court bailiffs when they arrived at South Butovo to move the possessions of one family (the Prokofevs). Those forces found their way blocked by about fifty people, most of whom were reportedly neighbors of the Prokofevs. National television networks broadcast images of the police clubbing civilians with riot sticks. Bailiffs were able to enter the Prokofevs' home and take their possessions. OP representatives, headed by Kucherena and Svanidze, were present on the site. On national television, Kucherena denounced the police's use of force and said that the city authorities should have been more willing to enter into dialogue with the residents. Others who joined in criticizing the city government's actions included Lukin and Valery Grebennikov, the first deputy chairman of the Duma's Committee on Civil, Criminal, Arbitrational, and Procedural Legislation. Sergey Tsoi, the mayor's press secretary, accused Kucherena and Svanidze of making the situation worse by arousing the emotions of the public, and of acting on the basis of ignorance or hidden goals.⁵⁷

On June 20, as residents of South Butovo formed a human barrier to block access for a bulldozer that had been brought to demolish the Prokofevs' home, Kucherena became more confrontational, proclaiming that "members of the Public Chamber of Russia stand together with the people and will stand to the end."⁵⁸ (Kucherena and Svanidze had spent the nights of June 19 and 20 with the local residents, keeping watch in the Prokofevs' yard.) On June 21, Kucherena asserted that the order that Yuri Luzhkov, the mayor of Moscow, had issued, which decreed the demolition of private homes to make new construction possible, had never been properly registered, and therefore was unlawful.⁵⁹ On June 22, Kucherena openly complained about Luzhkov's "personal inactivity in the situation" and announced that the OP's law enforcement commission would hold a special session, which he expected high-ranking officials of the city of Moscow to attend.⁶⁰ Kucherena was indignant when only Aleksei Chelyshev, the prefect of the Southwest Administrative District of Moscow, came to represent the city. Although Luzhkov was in Mongolia on an official visit at that time, Kucherena had expected the deputy mayor, Vladimir Resin, to attend.⁶¹

Other actors soon entered into the fray as critics of Luzhkov's administration. National television networks, including the government-controlled NTV and RTV, took the people of South Butovo's side against the Moscow city government.⁶² Aleksandr Lebedev, a deputy of the State Duma and a very wealthy entrepreneur, proposed the residents of South Butovo not leave the parcels of land on which their homes were located, but instead purchase the one-story prefabricated houses to be placed on that land. Lebedev wanted to set up a working headquarters in the neighborhood.⁶³ Meanwhile, Luzhkov delivered a

forceful denunciation of some citizens in South Butovo for engaging in “loutish behavior” and of Kucherena for trying to make a name for himself and stirring up “rally hysteria.”⁶⁴ When Lebedev’s employees tried to drive their trucks with trailers into South Butovo, they found that access for their vehicles was blocked by a row of police cars.⁶⁵

Kucherena’s efforts proved more productive; he was able to arrange a conversation with Resin and extract a promise that Resin would meet personally with South Butovo residents, and would promise to pay compensation not only for their homes but also for the land on which those homes stood.⁶⁶ On July 3, Resin, whose duties included supervision of construction in the capital, met with South Butovo residents and promised that the fate of each dissatisfied property owner would be resolved “at the highest level.” Resin added, “no one will be left without compensation.”⁶⁷ The city government’s attitude toward the residents of South Butovo became more solicitous. Kucherena and Svanidze still had hard feelings about some of the conflict’s results, however. In a July 20 interview, Kucherena revealed that he had received a number of death threats and implied that Luzhkov and his associates in the Moscow city government had sought to intimidate their critics by creating an atmosphere of fear. Svanidze reported that such tactics had included the beating of an OP member’s wife and child.⁶⁸ In early August, Chelyshev announced a moratorium on the eviction of residents from South Butovo, to last until the end of that month.⁶⁹

South Butovo is not the only part of Moscow where housing issues have aroused intense emotions. In late July 2006, *Izvestiya* reported that Moscow city officials had promised to consider residents’ opinions in any outlying settlement that the city planned to absorb.⁷⁰ Officials in the city’s construction administration also said that they would strive to preserve the existing qualities of such settlements, protecting the natural landscape and maintaining the rural appearance of homes as much as possible. In early August, apartment dwellers in buildings close to the center of Moscow formed the organization “Leave Us in Peace!” (*Ostavte nas v pokoe!*), charging that the city government frequently classified apartment buildings as dilapidated or in a disastrous condition, even when the buildings are in good condition and the apartment owners had paid for significant improvements, so that the city could force the residents out and sell the land to investors who wanted to construct upscale developments.⁷¹ About fifty people from several different locations were present at the first meeting of the new organization, which was created to publicize the city’s actions and protest instances of allegedly illegal property seizure.

The members attending that meeting signed an appeal to Putin calling for changes in the Housing Code of Russia to prevent resettlement of the type occurring in Moscow, and their lawyer said that he was preparing a series of lawsuits against the city government.⁷² According to an article in *Izvestiya*, about 500 “initiative groups” in Moscow were actively striving to defend the interests of residents resisting forced resettlement, and the actions of those groups were increasing.⁷³ Although most of the groups’ members are highly educated, middle- or high-income urban dwellers who are quite different from most of those living in the semi-rural settlement of South Butovo, *Izvestiya* implied that the example of the South Butovo protests had encouraged the dissatisfied residents in the locations with the highest real estate values to bring their complaints into the open. When about 200 Muscovites led by the organizers of Leave Us in Peace! met near the statue of Friedrich Engels carrying signs protesting the city’s approach to resettlement, they were joined by people from South Butovo who came to show their support.⁷⁴ The OP members’ actions that helped draw the public’s attention to the events in South Butovo in June may well have encouraged the other citizens to voice their demands on housing issues.

South Butovo residents staged protests again in early September because local construction projects were causing disruption. They complained that electricity and water were turned off at times and that a trench dug by workers had cut off a street in the neighborhood.⁷⁵ Some of the residents engaged in picketing and blocked the way for workers who tried to bring in more construction equipment and supplies. (At that point, it seemed that most of those living in that area had agreed to move after receiving enhanced offers, but those who wished to stay, still encouraged by Lebedev, posed obstacles to the resolution of the conflict.) On September 28, the Presidium of the Moscow city court revoked the decision of a lower court that had ordered the resettlement of the Prokofev family, whose possessions had been moved by bailiffs and police on June 19, 2006.⁷⁶ The city's procuracy had agreed with the Prokofevs' lawyer in calling for the city's highest court to set aside the lower court's decision. Yuliya Prokofeva and her attorney, Oleg Nikiforov, felt that they had scored a triumph, but the city still expected the Prokofevs to move at some time, though it was uncertain when that question would be resolved. Nikiforov said he was sure that the matter was "far from completion."⁷⁷ However, it was remarkable how much the city government had retreated, as reflected in the position that the procurator's office had taken and the judicial decision that served as a reproof for the city administration.⁷⁸

Conclusion

In the relatively short time since the OP has been in existence, the body has addressed a wide variety of issues. It is not possible to discuss all that the OP has done so far here; instead, I have presented a few snapshots to give some sense of that institution's method of operation during its first year of existence. The OP's actions have provided further confirmation of my thesis that "the Putin administration speaks of the need for a vigorous civil society but interprets civil society as a network of organizations that, while remaining technically outside the state, will be co-opted to assist the leadership of the political regime in pursuing the objectives that it has chosen for society."⁷⁹ Russian society's inability to independently generate organized citizen activism was assumed in a statement Surkov made when the OP was being formed: "If society isn't able to put forth initiatives on its own, then we must stimulate it."⁸⁰ Kucherena, one of the OP's most prominent members, seems to agree: "Civil society in Russia as it is coming into being needs support from above."⁸¹ Putin assumed that the state must take the lead in organizing civil society and in structuring the channels through which citizens can strive to satisfy their needs and interests. It follows that the sphere of Russian social organizations Putin envisioned will not have the degree of autonomy from the state that they do in Western conceptions of civil society. In Putin's design, each organization will carry out functions of two different sorts. On one hand, organizations will assist the state in achieving the goals of the political leadership; on the other hand, organizations will provide the political regime with valuable feedback from society. That design implicitly features a dividing line, drawn by political authority, between organizations whose goals and activities are legitimate and those whose goals and activities are illegitimate. The paternalistic regime will direct resources to the institutions and groups that it deems acceptable and will marginalize or eliminate those that are not.⁸² Aleksei Makarkin, an analyst of Russian politics, offers the opinion that "society has always been divided between the loyal and the universal (*vselenskoe*)."⁸³ He suggests that the loyal part of society "went to the Public Chamber, and the other part to 'Other Russia.'"⁸³

Recently, Russia's political leadership has taken the first steps toward the institutionalization of its vision of civil society. The OP is a prominent product of that process of institutionalization. The chamber's first year showed that it is not the dummy or puppet that its critics predicted. OP members were active in addressing a remarkably wide range of issues, were bold enough to align themselves with independent voices in the society on some of those issues, and did not hesitate to criticize some of the policies of state institutions. Because the OP was designed to be the capstone of civil society in Putin's Russia, it was destined to have a dualistic orientation—representing groups in society when it speaks to the state and mobilizing citizens to take part in achieving the state's goals. Soon after the

“[Public Chamber] members were active in addressing a remarkably wide range of issues, were bold enough to align themselves with independent voices in the society on some of those issues, and did not hesitate to criticize some of the policies of state institutions.”

OP's first plenary session, *Kommer-sant* suggested the new body would be assigned the role of mustering popular support for the “national projects” Putin chose.⁸⁴ Of course, that dualistic orientation places limits on the independence of the OP, particularly in relation to the presidency. Velikhov has been careful to emphasize the importance of a cooperative relationship with the state, because he realizes that his chamber derives its status and prestige from the president. Velikhov said, “We will work in harmony [*v soglasii*] with the president, the presidential administration, and the government.”⁸⁵

The relationship between the OP and the political regime is a mixed one, including elements of cooperation and an adversarial interaction (as is also true for such previously designated representatives of civil society as Pamfilova and Lukin). If the members of the chamber wish to continue advocating positions on issues facing Russia and to exert a degree of influence on behalf of the public's interests, its members will have to observe the limits inherent in their institution's position. Will the most prominent representatives of the quasi-civil society in Putin's Russia play the role of a loyal (and internal) but effective opposition, or will they find that they have been co-opted to provide the illusion of pluralism? Before the OP came into existence, Auzan said that the body could turn out to be either a channel of feedback from society or an instrument of manipulation serving the political authorities.⁸⁶ The best guess, based on the evidence available so far, is that its character will reflect a mixture of the two roles, although the precise balance within that mixture is a question that remains open. The OP's independence and influence will probably vary from one issue to another, and public opinion may be an important asset for them when they direct their attention to some subjects.

There may not be a firm consensus on the role the chamber is supposed to play, and there may be different points of view on that question even among the members of that body. In December 2006, a journalist quoted Markov as saying that the OP had succeeded in demonstrating that “at least there is someone in the country who can defend the small and simple person.”⁸⁷ Similarly, in February 2007 Kucherena asserted that the OP's “main task is to defend the citizen, who sometimes finds himself all alone in the face of the indifference of bureaucrats.”⁸⁸ Velikhov has emphasized the importance of other roles for

that institution, such as stimulating the activity of civil society organizations; fostering a dialogue between social organizations and the state; and offering the benefits of expertise in advising legislative and executive officials.⁸⁹ He has not suggested that the OP should emphasize the troubleshooting role envisioned by Kucherena, which would mean intervening to clear up abuses of the rights of individual citizens. Velikhov seems to be more reluctant to enter into confrontations with executive officials. Different members of the relatively young OP have shown interest in different roles for the institution, and so far no one has imposed a uniform position.

When attempting to evaluate the OP's role in the relationship between the state and society, we should be aware that neither "the state" nor "society" is a monolithic, indivisible whole. Each is internally differentiated, because it consists of various groups and institutions, each of which has its own identity and may have its own distinct interests and goals. The mayor of Moscow's office is part of the state, and the mayor is an important figure among the authorities. The conflict over South Butovo, however, showed that, in some cases, the mayor may not receive a great deal of sympathy or support from certain institutions in the central government, particularly the presidential administration. Different institutions with distinct objectives made it possible for the OP to play a visible role as an advocate for a group of citizens in the South Butovo case, with implications for the interaction between home owners and the local government in other neighborhoods in Moscow and potentially in other cities. The scandal arising from the brutality toward Sychov placed the Defense Ministry in a vulnerable position, and whereas it is unknown if the president told the head of that ministry that he needed to show serious concern over the problem of *dedovshchina* in the military, we can assume that the minister would have been able to reach that conclusion himself. In that situation, the OP was able to play the role of a public interest watchdog, confident of having public support without incurring the risk of antagonizing the president. On some occasions, the variety of viewpoints and interests among various actors within the state created opportunities for the OP to draw attention to issues and put pressure on institutions to address problems.

Society is made of a wide range of different groups, just as the state consists of many different institutions, and the public's relationship with state institutions varies greatly from one group to another. The OP can enter into an alliance with some organized groups on the basis of shared goals in relation to a specific issue, as when the OP invited a representative of the Union of Committees of Soldiers' Mothers to join the assessment of the problem of brutality toward recruits in the military. The possibility of recruiting social groups as partners on specific issues can enhance the OP's influence by giving it greater credibility in the eyes of the public as it plays the role of a watchdog in relation to selected issues. The OP can choose which groups it will regard as potential allies (knowing that is almost always safe to work closely with groups that are highly supportive of the authorities, though such groups probably are known by the public not to have much independence, but in some instances drawing in a group that is more critical of the government, such as the Union of Committees of Soldiers' Mothers) so long as the chamber does not closely associate itself with groups that are regarded by the authorities as completely beyond the pale. When the OP invites cooperation from an organization that has incurred hostility from a state ministry, regional government, or city government whose policies that group has criticized, the OP may give that organization influence that it would not otherwise have, or at least give the organization a better chance to have its voice heard. There are other institutionalized

representatives of society, such as the human rights ombudsman and the President's Committee on Human Rights and Civil Society Development. The OP often works in cooperation with such representatives—for example, when its position has coincided with that of Lukin's. The number of such officially designated representatives of society is multiplying, which may be to the advantage of the OP and the regional public chambers, some of which have already been in operation, and the remainder of which are coming into existence.

The OP's impact on government policies is still uncertain, though the members of that body who have discussed the topic do not feel that the chamber has been very successful in putting its stamp on major decisions.⁹⁰ The OP's activities rarely consist of reacting to a story of great human-interest value, such as the abuse of Sychov or the confrontation in South Butovo. Most of the time, the OP deliberates on issues as it seeks to participate in a more conventional process of policymaking that entails the drafting of broad guidelines for long-term actions. This happened when the chamber offered advice on proposed legislation on subjects such as health care, the reform of local government, and measures addressing ethnic prejudice and xenophobia. On the basis of the evidence that I have seen so far, the OP will likely be able to exert influence "at the margins," making some difference in the formulation of policies when the most powerful forces are aligned in such a way as to give the OP the opportunity to tip the balance a bit one way or another. (Success in influencing government decision making is not an inherent attribute of an organization in civil society, although one may assume that many of those organizations hope to exert such influence.)

Regardless of its impact on policymaking in any particular area, the OP's most important asset may be its access to key decision makers,⁹¹ and its second most important asset may be its access to public opinion through the mass media.⁹² There have been hints to suggest, not surprisingly, that a prized advantage for members of the chamber is their access to the staff of the presidential administration.⁹³ That is the most valuable type of connection in Russia, since the presidency is the dominant institution in a highly centralized political system. It appears that the privilege of confidential dialogue with officials in the presidential administration has the advantage of conferring a high degree of legitimacy to any demand by *obshchestvenniki* that they be given information about events and be consulted by other institutions, but the privilege also has the disadvantage of dictating prudence for the OP members, and it might give the staff of Putin's administration behind-the-scenes opportunities to set boundaries for the articulation of interests by the *obshchestvenniki*.⁹⁴ Putin proposed the creation of the OP, after all. His stamp of approval is the main source of its influence. That approval implies strengths and limits for the OP within the parameters set by the current political regime in Russia.

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March 7, 2007. Kucherena has been among those in the OP most vehemently rejecting critical evaluations of the situation in Russia by Western sources.

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88. "Yabloko Deputy Chief, Public Chamber Figure Clash on Russian TV," NTV Mir, Moscow, BBC Monitoring, February 1, 2007.

89. Dulman, "Obyazany vyslushat."

90. Anatoly Medvedev, "We Are Not a Kremlin Reception Office," *Moscow Times*, January 23, 2007. Medvedev offers this assessment that in OP's the first year of existence: "The Duma largely ignored its suggestions" about bills that the Duma considered. In Dulman, "Obyazany vyslushat," Velikhov admitted, "Of course, the voice of the Public Chamber is not heard much in the decisive hearings in the parliament." In a July 2006 seminar, Roshal voiced his feeling that after the OP prepares recommendations and executive and legislative officials read them, "after all, as a rule, no one gives any response whatever." The OP's influence varies from one piece of proposed legislation to another, based on the issues involved, but that such influence is usually marginal. See Dmitry Vladimirov, "Roshal Complains to Journalists," *Rossiiskaya gazeta*, July 30, 2006.

91. After Roshal vented his frustration over the tendency of officials to ignore the OP's recommendations, he added, "There is some use from the Public Chamber." He then asked, "If I had not been a member of the Public Chamber, who would have let me into the meetings of government?" See Vladimirov, "Roshal Complains to Journalists."

The Duma has been forced to give OP members some access to its hearings on proposed legislation. Also, when the OP arouses the public's concern about an issue, state officials are virtually guaranteed to give the issue their attention.

92. Samarina, "Palata pishet." The amount of time that two national television channels devoted to coverage of the OP's activities varied each month in 2006—it peaked in June (the time of the confrontations in South Butovo) and decreased to a low point in December. Coverage of the OP in Russian newspapers has decreased since the later part of 2006 and on the whole was at a lower level in 2007 than it was in 2006. One reason for decreased coverage might be that the OP is no longer new and the novelty has worn off. Another reason may be that in 2007 none of its members were involved in a story evoking the degree of dramatic human interest that was aroused by the Sychoy case or the conflict in South Butovo. Nevertheless, reports on the work of the OP still appear in the Russian press, and the chamber addresses a wide range of timely issues. Marina Ryklina, the head of the OP's press service, asserted that "all that we are able to do is to persuade, to demonstrate, to make noise, and attract public opinion." Aleksandr Latshev and Viktoriya Sokolova, "Obshchestvennaya palata: 5% godovykh," *Izvestiya*, January 22, 2007.

93. Natalya Kostenko, "Obshchestvennaya palata soschitala dobrye dela," *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, August 3, 2006.

94. Kira Latukhina, "Palata za god opustela," *Vedomosti*, December 28, 2006. Latukhina speculates that state power ("vlast") may have "prompted the *obshchestenniki* on what questions to pay attention to." No members of the chamber have confirmed that notion, and some have strongly denied it. Kucherena insisted, "No one has phoned me from the Kremlin and is giving any instructions." See "Obshchestvennaya palata," *Interfax*. Even if one supposes that officials in the presidential administration do not advise OP members to restrain themselves in relation to some issues, prudence would dictate an awareness of the limits imposed by the fact that the chamber owes its existence to the president of Russia and depends on him for its authority. As far as I am aware, there is no record of any public criticism of Putin or officials in his administration by OP members.