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The Promise and Peril of Civil Society in Russia

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Abstract

The collapse of authoritarian regimes, particularly in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union has revived the idea of civil society. It is widely accepted that a vibrant civil society is necessary, although not sufficient, precondition for democracy. Civic groups may contribute to democratic stability in two ways: internally, civic groups inspire habits of cooperation, solidarity, public-spiritedness, and trust; whereas externally, these networks aggregate interests and articulate demands to ensure the government's accountability to its citizens. It is this dense infrastructure of groups, some argue, that is the key to making democracy work.

Key Words: civil society, authority, democracy

Many political scientist see a pressing need to deal with the consequences of the declining ability of various governments to govern and to confront the fact that one of the main forces, contributing to the erosion of effective government and of public confidence in government is the seeming insolvable nature of socio, economic, religious and ethnic differences that make political social peace in more and more states a problematic exercise. Russia has been one of such states in recent years which faced such adversaries.

Democracy theory suggests the close relationship between democracy and civil society and the strong intimate interconnection between the two. Following these scholarly claims, development practitioners put a lot of efforts in establishing civil society in order to promote democracy abroad In Eastern Europe and

Russia, these efforts took place after the breakdown of communism, when, along with privatization, free trade and other neoliberal economic policies, a lot of foreign aid was channeled into 'civil society development.' After the first years it became clear that the results of these efforts were not exactly as anticipated.

It appeared that it is not easy to build civil society where there is no civic culture to support it. The results were eroded institutions embedded into the old corruption and patron-client relations, 'gate-keeping' or 'privatization' of western assistance money, and little understanding of what is civil society and how does it work (see Wedel 2000). Russians' behavior was instrumental and did not incorporate acting upon civic virtues. Major problems arose as a result of the absence of norms underlying

civic actions. Voluntarism and civil society were not in readily understood by the public.

Although there exists conceptual ambiguity and theoretical disaccord, what is now called civil society no longer includes the economy constituted on the basis of the private law and controlled by labor, capital and commodity markets. Rather, non-governmental and non-profit organizations, associations and movements based on spontaneity comprise the institutional core of civil society. Of course in a given society we can observe various types of non-governmental and non-profit social organizations and institutions, among them also those that could hardly be regarded as civil society actors. Then a question arises as to criteria that can help us distinguish between them.

Developing a democratic culture and civil society takes time, no less than it does for restructuring the economy. In a mutually reinforcing equilibrium, norms and network of civic engagement contribute to economic perspective and in turn are reinforced by that prosperity.

To what extent has Russia developed a civil society and what forces are shaping civil society in Russia or what are the emerging patterns of interactions among civil society, the public spheres and the state, similarly how can reciprocal linkages among political culture, economic development and stable democracy manifest themselves in the Russian context, are some of the issues which emerge for the discussion whenever there is a reference of civil society and democracy in Russia. The

current paper will basically address the following issues in length.

In this background it is interesting to note that in the mid 1990, the European commission's forward studies unit identified five reference scenarios for Russia's future, they are as follows: - 1) a policy based on improvisation 2) enlightened authoritarianism 3) gradual democratization 4) Hard line authoritarianism 5) Weakened central Power.

Considering the five scenarios carefully what we observe today is enlightened authoritarianism that may meddle through or else evolve either into hard line authoritarianism or gradual democratization, which one prevails, will depend not just upon Putin, but also on the quality of civil society.

This paper starts with the meaning and working definition of civil society. It then will venture into the descriptions of two paradigms of Russian society and their relevance to the current domestic environment, underlines emerging patterns of interactions between the state and society, and finished with short policy recommendations based on the analysis of dominant trends.

Civil society

Civil society gained its current popularity in the context of democratization, whether this was in terms of explaining the transition from authoritarian rule to liberal democracy in Latin America and Eastern Europe or of explaining the deepening of democracy in already established democracies in the west. Its usage in this

context, however, has been hampered by the concepts normative elasticity. This is not just a result of the careless way in which many theorists have used the concept, although this is a factor, but rather because normative ambiguity exists within the concept itself. Civil society contains both liberal and democratic norms. This is both its main strength and its main weakness: it explains why it appeals to so many diverse theorists, yet it also makes its usage difficult.

Georgiana Blakeley says that civil society is a notoriously slippery and ambiguous concept to use. Indeed, such is the ambiguity of civil society that many analysts today question the usefulness of civil society as an explanatory concept at all. Kumar, for example, ended his article tracing the history of the concept of civil society by questioning the extent to which civil society was more useful than other related concepts such as the public sphere or citizenship.

Yet in many ways, civil society is relatively easy to define. Most authors would agree that civil society refers to the intermediate sphere between the state and the private realm of the family, in which citizens associate voluntarily and organize independently to manage their own affairs.

Ruesshemeyer defines civil society as the totality of social institutions and association, both formal and informal that are not strictly production related nor governmental or familial in character.

According to Baker civil society is about maintaining the boundaries between state

and civil society as a basic structural precondition for democracy, whilst at once reinvigorating the public sphere in accordance with the politics of deepening democracy.

As such the ambiguity surrounding civil society arises not from definitional confusion, but from the conflicting norms within the concept itself. This normative ambiguity explains why, on the one hand, civil society holds appeal for liberal democratic elites, backed by such organizations as the world bank and the IMF, who see in civil society the ability to act as a check on the power of the state whilst simultaneously acting as a complement to its activities. On the other hand, civil society can appeal to marginalize social movement actors who see in civil society the chance to expand and deepen democratic spaces. As a result of this duality, many therefore probably empathize with Walzer's lamentation that 'I want to join, but I am somewhat uneasy with, the civil society argument'

Much of this ambiguity undoubtedly comes from the long intellectual history of the concept and the different uses to which it has been put.

However, it is also important to emphasize that the many different political theorists who have turned to civil society as a conceptual resource have generally done so in the face of remarkably similar problems. Ever since the development of a capitalist market economy on the one hand and a liberal political nation-state on the other, theorist past and present have struggled with a set of similar problems. In

particular, how to combine the pursuit of individual self interest and freedom, which capitalism requires, with the recognition that we live in a community which, perforce, requires some kind of social cohesion and some degree of governmental authority. For many theorists, civil society has in some form or another provided a solution to this problem.

What was, common to all attempts to articulate a notion of civil society was the problematic relation between the private and the public, the individual and the social, public ethics and individual interest, individual passions and private concerns.

Current usage of the term

Political Science's interest in the concept of civil society revived in the 1980s and 1990s as the world witnessed its supposed resurrection in democratization processes in Africa, South America and Eastern Europe. The revival of this concept drew upon and developed the parallel discourse on social movements which first arose in Latin America in the 1970s to explain the explosion of new collective actors onto the public state in the midst of brutal authoritarian regimes. In many ways the new social movements were synonymous with civil society writ large or, as Pearce remarks, sociologists talked about new social movements; political scientist about civil society. But whatever the label used, academics were engaged in trying to explain the same phenomenon: the new collective actors were perceived as the important beginnings of an associational network- the so called resurrection of civil society- which threatened to challenge not

only the authoritarian regimes per se, but also conventional assumptions about the kind of democratic polity for which these collective actors were struggling.

Within this context of democratization, however, it quickly became apparent that there were contradictory conceptions of civil society. In particular, two discrete concepts of civil society are at work depending on whether one is explaining the transition from some form of authoritarian rule to a liberal democracy or explaining the deepening of an already established liberal democracy.

Two Paradigms for civil society in Russia.

After ten years of transformation one can discern two clusters of thought about Russian civil society. One is traditional and the other is modern. The former is "path dependence" where one can get to depend upon ones origin that is historical roots. This school of thought gives importance to historical past for describing the prospects of civil society in Russia. Ziniada Golenkova has suggested that in Russia unlike the countries of the west, another type of social system had evolved historically and this system was based on the effectiveness of power and not the effectiveness of property. Relations between property and power were inverted with enforced homogenization give a number of constraints going back to the society past continue to restrict the articulation of interests. Yuri Legada, the patriarch of Russian sociology, concludes that 'Homosovietus' as social type has proved to be much more stable, and capable of adapting to the change of circumstances than it seemed ten years ago. This view of

thought believes that civil society existed in the old system in a very embryonic form.

The second school of thought presents contrasting views of the relevance of history for the development of civil society in Russia. Despite its importance, history does not preclude a significant change in Russian culture. Thus based on their analysis of grassroots attitudes, Timothy Colton and Michael McFaul challenges an established wisdom of comparative politics, which portrayed the processes of democratization as a top level elite affair aimed at the establishment of new institutions, thus facilitating democratic change. They argue that the Russian people have assimilated democratic values faster than the elite have negotiated democratic institutions and that Russian society seems more transformed than the political structures governing it.

Civil society and social activism in Russia.

Fifteen years after the demise of the soviet regime, scholars still vigorously debate why communism collapsed, why Russia has largely failed to democratize, and how to characterize Russia's current strategy of political and economic development. A rare issue of general agreement, however, is the weakness of Russian civil society. In 1994, M. Steven Fish characterized Russian civil society as "inchoate and underdeveloped," and later works, including Howards study of persistently low organizational membership in Russia and eastern Germany and Henderson's examination of western efforts to facilitate civil society development in Russia, largely confirm this early assessment.

While the challenges face by civil society actors in Russia are widely acknowledged, there has been less study of exactly how these limitations manifest themselves in practice and how they influence the ability of social activists to reach out to the public, to form coalitions, and to advocate for new government policies. The collapse of communism and the disintegration of the Soviet Union introduced new political opportunities and resources into what had been a largely closed system, initiating a period of rapid organizational innovation and clear patterns of organizational development. Yet thus far these new opportunities and resources have not generated social movements that have succeeded in mobilizing the public or pressuring the government to adopt their agendas. Indeed, one paradox of the development of civil society in the post soviet period is that social organization have proliferated, but without a corresponding increase in their ability to join together in effective campaigns or to influence public policy.

Why do social organizations remain fragmented and generally lacking in influence in spite of their numbers? Why are there few mass based social organizations in Russia despite the surfeit of social problems that emerged in the post soviet period? Why government officials have charged that some of the most well known nongovernmental organizations are anti Russian"? – are some of the questions to which Laura Henry has responded in one of her article. (2006)

Laura Henry points out that, examining and explaining the organizational diversity

that exist within the social movements, offers one path to understand this weakness and to assess the likelihood of change in the future. To give currency to her argument Henry has cited example of Russian environmental organizations from mid 1990.

Differentiating political arena from the amalgamated Soviet system was one of the main tasks of the post-communist transformation. At the initial stage of transformation, independent social groups and movements (“informal groups”) mushroomed, which led people to believe in an emergence of civil society in Russia. However these informal groups disappeared quickly after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Drastic political changes from Soviet Union to the independent Russia and “war of pork barrels over state property under the name of marketization” had led, combined with Western aid for “building civil society to a structural shift in civil society weakening its developmental potentials. With regard to the social consequences of the mode of marketization and liberalization, Ha Yong-Chool has already pointed out their negative effects on the emerging civil society in Russia. Corrupt and illegal social ethos resulted from the post- communist transformation would not provide a favorable environment for civil society. Western assistance was also viewed to have somewhat paradoxical effects on the development of civil society. It has merely produced distinct civic elites without a visible constituency and horizontal networks among themselves. This paper tries to provide an alternative explanation for Underdevelopment of civil society in Russia mainly focusing on interactions between

civil society actors and the state during the transformation process.

Need for a civil society in Russia.

Historically, Russia has never had a working civil society, but efforts since the 1990s have been made to establish a civil society that is similar to that of America’s civil society. Currently, the already laborious and slow formation of civil society in Russia has slowed down. In separate sectors it has come to a halt or even gone backwards. This is why we welcome the initiative of the Administration of the President on calling upon the Civic Forum. [Held in Moscow, November, 2001].

A system of so-called “managed democracy” is developing in Russia instead of a democratic society predicated on civil institutions. Under this system, citizens are gradually restricted from decision-making processes which may have direct impacts on their interests, and society in general is deprived of the opportunity to control governmental activities. Consequently, a situation emerges in which governments do not serve the public interest and are not controlled by the public. On the contrary, the public becomes more and more subordinate to the government.

Throughout history, Russia has had a long fight to create a civil society that operates from within its own country. Individuals and businesses have funded non-profit organizations in hopes to encourage Russians to participate in their own philanthropic endeavors. However, “the bottom line, according to activists and their international funders, is that Russians simply

haven't stepped in to foster major philanthropic and activist work and are almost certain not to do so in the wake of Khodorkovsky's arrest, which was interpreted here as a warning to avoid politicized activities".

Activists are fighting to protect the non-profit sector in Russia, but with little to no help from Putin. Many Russians are aware of Putin's advances to demolish their civil society. "Putin declared war on Russia's civil society.

The author views the following as the main reasons for the current situation in Russia:

Weakness of the judiciary system with its dependence on the executive branch of the government. The judiciary system for the most part protects the interests of authorities or corporations against citizens, instead of protecting the law, human rights and liberties, public institutions and the overall interests of the nation;

A trend of tightening punitive and fiscal functions of the government to the detriment of its other functions, such as providing social protection and safety of the population;

Absence of a balanced distribution of authority and responsibilities between federal, regional, and local governments;

Development of criminal networks in the country (particularly, symbiotic relationships of criminal elements with law enforcement agencies and manipulation of government officials through corruption and bribery), which erode the foundations of

society and state, while transforming civil rights and liberties into fictitious notions;

Growing limitations on public access to information, expansion of official secrecy requirements, the ongoing practice of violating fundamental civil rights and freedom, and fabrication of espionage cases;

Lack of fully-fledged legislation for conducting elections and the absence of procedures for its enforcement preclude genuinely free elections and referendums. Elections results are not precluded from being falsified, and it precludes pre-term expulsion of elected officials, who fall short of their constituents' expectations. Thus the constitutional right to be involved in managing affairs of the state is not guaranteed to its citizens.

Mass media are exceedingly dependent on the executive branch of government, as well as on financial and industrial groups. This brings about the uniformity of presented information and fosters manipulation of public opinion.

Procedures for interaction between society and state have been destroyed. Government officials select representatives of the so-called "public," with whom they conduct "ritualistic" meetings, instead of maintaining a dialogue with real people.

Insufficient support is provided to small and medium size companies, which must comprise the foundation of a market economy and free civil society. The government is still very actively involved in private commerce.

A lack of legal and economic conditions obstructs the development of non-

governmental institutions and charitable organizations. Thus, the third sector has to rely on the international or corporate financial sponsorship. Authorities exert direct administrative pressure on "non-compliant" NGOs (e.g., in some cases, NGOs are not allowed to be registered). This is especially common at the regional level.

The government does not provide appropriate opposition to fascist and nationalistic ideologies;

The separation of the Church from the government is rather hazy. Religion is increasingly becoming a political force.

Military operations are conducted in Russia in the absence of legislation for imposing curfews and declaring a national emergency. Non-professional military forces are engaged, especially on domestic territory.

It can be argued that without development of civil society the progress of Russia along with the democratic path and its integration in the world community is impossible.

The following measures should be taken in order to achieve the creation of civil society and the rule of law in Russia:

The efficiency of managing the government should be increased through the social involvement of citizens, the development of partnerships between the public and the institutions of power, and the development of democratic culture.

The public should gain control over the activities of power structures. The rights of citizens to participate in managing the

affairs of the state should be implemented at the constitutional level.

There should be a strict delineation of organizational and financial functions of the government, pertaining to the economic interests of the state and social protection of the population. Environmental monitoring and assessment should be put back in place and maintained outside of the government agencies.

Economic incentives and mechanisms need to be created for the development of free civil society. Social inequality should be decreased through the complete waiver of real leasing fees imposed for the use of natural resources. Economic activities should be decentralized.

Management of public affairs should be transferred to the local level. The list of elected officials should be expanded, whereas the number of appointed officials should be decreased.

Real independence of judiciary power is required. Citizens should be granted equal access to justice (through the growing number of courts and judges and through the centralized and independent funding of the courts). Military Judicial Boards should be abolished.

Punishment for inadvertent criminal actions and for first time crime should be mitigated, while sentences for serious and repeated crime should become more stringent. The penitentiary system should become more humane, which could be done by adhering to sanitary and epidemiological rules and norms.

Business activities should be organized on "declarative" rather than "permissible" bases. Federal legislation should (by way of developing a comprehensive list) identify cases in which appropriate permits are required, as well as lists of documents required to obtain such permits.

Citizens should get unobstructed access to information, including environmental data, as well as information about potential threats to their safety or health and about human rights and civil liberties violations. Procedures should be established for bringing government officials to justice for classifying open data as classified or copyright, as well as for persecuting citizens and organizations for collecting, analyzing and distributing such information. Classified data should be unconditionally disclosed upon the expiration of its term.

The right of citizens to recall elected officials who fall short of their electorate's expectations before the end of their term in office should be restored and legally secured.

Public debate procedures for all decisions made with regard to public health and well-being should be developed and turned into law. Such debates should occur at the stage of preparing the legislation, with results of these debates being taken into consideration when making final decisions.

The armed forces should expediently transfer to a contract basis ("professional armed forces"). Alternative civilian service should be introduced in the armed forces. Military personnel should receive their civil rights back in the time of peace.

Economic incentives and legal opportunities should be created in support of public organizations either from charities or due to public demand.

Religious training and rites should be taken out of government offices and organizations. There should be a ban on mandatory religious training in private schools (with the exception of schools funded by religious institutions).

There is a need for specific procedures for dialogue between the government and the public. Such procedures should be developed and implemented (This includes the involvement of public organizations in the development and evaluation of draft legislation and legislative acts, incorporation of public organizations representatives on the boards of ministries and agencies, and their participation in the work of government committees).

The armed forces should not be allowed to participate in military operations on the territory of their own country without declaring martial law.

Civil Society in the West and in Russia

Democracy theory assigns to civil society an increasingly important position, especially with the spread of liberalism around the world. The concept of civil society originates in the core of western social science and civilization. Modernization rendered civil society as an unquestionable value in attempt to establish a social order, a direct relation between state and citizenry without numerous intermediaries.

Numerous scholars have discussed the place of civil society in the democratic system. Beginning with Hegel, discourse of civil society as an uneasy amalgamation between public and private proposed the complex scheme for resolving this conflict, where legal framework, state action and authority, corporative organization, and public opinion all play an important role⁴. Karl Polanyi provided a clearer outlined structure, characterized as a system consisting of three components – state, economy, and society. Society strikes to protect itself when it is depressed by other components, while states protect by mediating⁵. Classical work by Lipset (1963) “Political Man” illustrates a moderate tension between the political forces in a democratic system.

This creates a vital balance in the society that preserves a stable democracy: the three components of society, state, market acting in vibrant dynamics.

The first question this essay attempts to answer is what are the underpinning norms for civil society in the West and in Russia. From the first glance it looks like there is not much ground for civil society development in Russia, as the underlying norms do not exist.

Protection of an individual. The origins of individualism and self-interest lay in the religious philosophies of Calvinism and Catholicism and Judeo-Christian philosophy of the Western civilization⁶. For liberals the connection between self-interest and liberal democratic institutions is very strong. John Owen in “How Liberalism Produces

Democratic Peace” makes the following observation.

Liberalism seeks to actualize the harmony of interests among individuals by insuring that the freedom of each is compatible with the freedom of all. It thus calls for structures that protect the right of each citizen to self-government.

Individual in Russian society. While the development of Western-European societies assumed a certain amount of individualism, the role of an individual in a Russian society was traditionally different. Russians lived in “obschina,” which is a self-standing community living and owning property together. It is a spontaneously appeared phenomenon. Obschina has a number of central values. The first one is mir, which can be translated as either “peace” or “world”. Individual person was expected to do everything to protect mir for the obschina. The second value is “spravedlivost” meaning “truth” or “equity,” which meant initial social equity of all people (at least men) in relation to the land. The land belongs to God, and therefore every person living on the land has a right for it. Boronoev and Smirnov conclude that foundations of the Russian obschina do not imply values stimulating individual productive activity⁸. These foundations in opposite fostered a tendency for distribution and equalizing in Russian mentality, including intelligentsia, which were dominating over interests of production and creativity.

Orthodoxy contributed to this philosophy of egalitarianism.

Institutionalized civic behavior. Civic norms and institutionalized associational life constitute a core of civil society in the West. These cultural norms foster consummatory behavior of actors. From a modernized, Western point of view, civil society needs institutions, which are based on the norms of civic associational life, i.e. the ones of reciprocity, trust, horizontal equality, accountability and cooperation; civil society then is social contract based on these norms. As many functions of welfare etc. have to be assumed by society in a liberal state, it is supposed that there is a shared understanding of a public good. Social Contract and Public Good in Russia.

Conclusion

During the post communist years, Russia has made a considerable progress in adjusting to international realities. Putin's vision of working with the west without forsaking Russia's own interests seems to be a balanced one. He has steered a middle course between the extremes of Gorbachev and kozyrev's westernism, on the one hand,

and primakov's great power balancing on the other. Putin's international strategy has commanded a great deal of attention in both scholarly and policy circles. Andrei Tsygankov has identified three elements of Putin's policy i.e. state concentration, cooperation with the west and Russia's projection of influence in the former soviet region.

It can be argued that at this juncture and taking an account of Putin's strategy, there is an urgent need for broadening space for civil society in Russia. The patterns of interaction accountability and learning that are developing within the framework of the community of democracies initiative and the world forum of democracy, it would become an important instrument in ensuring the positive integration of Russian civil society actors into global civil society. Civil society neglected so far in Russia should be given voice at least at regional level if not at national level since its active participation only will protect Russia's interest of national security in post September 11 strategic geopolitical environment.

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