

Russian civil society: history, today, and future prospects

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1. Introduction

The term “civil society” in Russia is often taken to refer to civic organisations and movements created during and after the break-up of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s. Sometimes, the term is equated more narrowly with “NGOs”; registered non-government, non-commercial or public (*obschestvenny*) organisations. However, this paper attempts to look at civil society more widely. First, it considers both registered organisations and more spontaneous or informal civic actions. Second, it follows local experts in challenging the idea that Russian civil society began in 1989-91. In this way it features not just recent developments on the ground, but also recent analyses by historians, sociologists and political scientists that take us back into the soviet and pre-soviet periods.

The study was written as part of the ‘Civil Society at a Crossroads?’ initiative, within which the issue of how to analyse civil society in middle-income or “post-aid” countries was an important theme.¹ With a per capita GDP of 12,993 USD and 66th position in the United Nations’ Human Development Index in 2011, Russia is a middle-level country on many indices. In the 1990s it suddenly transited from being a significant international donor with its own distinctive model of state-led development, to being an external aid and advice recipient.

The 1990s came to an end with Vladimir Putin’s accession to the presidency and the establishment of a quite different regime. Putin re-established a top-down order in Russia and has proved to be quite antagonistic both to Western foreign policy and to pro-Western civil society groups. However, both capitalism and multiparty democracy continued their uncertain paths in Russia through the last decade. After two terms as president, Putin handed over to Dmitri Medvedev, who pursued a similar line but with a focus on “modernisation” and a slightly more liberal approach to both foreign investors and home-grown CSOs. And as of March 2012, Russians have Putin as their president again. This study is part of a larger piece of research on Russia’s development path and the role of civil society in it.² Looking to the future, the paper highlights two main trends. First, the continuation of Russia’s tradition of civic and political activism, seen most dramatically in the mass demonstrations in Moscow and other cities in the run-up to the parliamentary and presidential elections in late 2011-early 2012; but also around the country on a range of social and economic themes. Second, the major steps made by CSOs and local government in implementing social partnership, with new funds from the state that both replace and build on the contributions of foreign donors during 1995-2005.

¹ For more information on this initiative, see www.intrac.org/pages/en/civil-society-at-a-crossroads.html

² Special thanks are due to Moscow-based colleagues in the Association for Social Information, the Civil Society Studies Centre at the Higher School of Economics (HSE), and the Institute for Collective Action for ideas, contacts and analyses that this study has drawn on; also to civil society activists and friends in the Urals and Siberia regions who provided valuable insights into civil society development and activism.

2. History

The ideology of civil society played a large part in the pro-capitalist revolutions in Eastern European and former Soviet Union countries that heralded their “transition periods”. In most of them, the new regimes required a re-evaluation or rewriting of history, including both the soviet and pre-soviet period. In Russia this has included efforts both to rehabilitate the authoritarian Tsarist regime, and to identify democratic or liberal trends in the pre-soviet period.

The question of at what point civil society emerged in pre-1917 Russia, and to what extent it possessed the characteristics of civil society in Western European countries, is one of many controversies that have arisen in the reinterpretation of Russian history. Some experts date its appearance to the late-18th or early 19th century when the first voluntary associations appeared. Others prefer a date around the turn of the 20th century – when voluntary groups achieved a firmer legal basis and consequently the variety and geographical spread of organisations, their popular support and relations with government were all more developed.

This paper follows experts at the Civil Society Centre at HSE in dividing the history of civil society in Russia into four main stages: 1) the beginnings of civil society in the late 18th century; 2) civil society growth from the time of the 1860s Great Reforms; 3) the Soviet period; 4) the transition period.³ A short account of each period is given, with case studies and consideration of how earlier stages have led into subsequent ones (often quite abruptly!)

2.1 The beginnings of Russian civil society

The first stage (1760-1860) flows out of Catherine the Great’s reforms to the Russian estates (*sosolviya*) and was characterised by the creation of public organisations related to science, literature, the arts, leisure and charitable activities. These included famous and influential associations like the Russian Geographical Society, the Free Economics Society, the Moscow Agricultural Society, the Russian Technical Society, and the Pirogov Association of Russian Doctors. These societies were set up with hopes for friendly cooperation with the Tsarist authorities and in the second half of the 19th century their members played a key role lobbying for social and legal reform.

Case study: The Imperial Russian Geographical Society

Founded by prominent scholars Fedor Litke and Karl von Baer in 1846, the Geographical Society became one of the most influential voluntary associations in Russia. The main aim of its initiators was to promote a knowledge and love of Russia. They included many military and government officials and scientists, and when they approached Tsar Nicholas I and his Minister of Internal Affairs for support, they argued that a private society would be able to collect data and popularise findings in a way that the government could not. One of the most important sections of the Geographical Society was its Ethnographic Division. Both Litke and Baer were particularly interested in studies of non-Russian peoples living within the Empire. In 1847, the Society sent out 7,000 questionnaires to all corners of the Empire to collect information on a wide variety of topics: the physical features of the people of Russia; language, dialect and slang; domestic life including material goods and customs; intellectual, moral and social aspects of life; folk legends and memories.

³ Quotations in the following pages are from the Higher School for Economics (HSE) Report 2011: 5-18.

The society opened a Statistics Division that operated very close to government policy at a time when statistics were usually kept secret. It also opened a Political Economy section but then discontinued it. As Joseph Bradley comments, “*a forum outside government in autocratic Russia existed on treacherous terrain*” - but the society “*drew in the public and created civic consciousness*”.⁴

2.2 Civil society growth under Tsarism

Russia's second stage of civil society development began with the Great Reforms ushered in by Tsar Alexander II in the 1860s. Serfdom was abolished, basic civil rights were established in law, and the first steps taken in the creation of a local government system. CSOs expanded gradually, became more professional, and began to provide educational and health support to vulnerable groups across the country. At the same time industrialisation and urbanisation gathered pace in Russia. The extension of the railway system across Siberia to the Pacific was one of the most dramatic examples of this in the late 19th century.

However, the development of capitalist relations in the economy was not mirrored by political changes. The period of reforms gave way to a new period of repression and political stagnation, and the state was challenged by increasingly radical political forces such as the *narodniks* with their “to the people” movement, culminating in the 1905 revolution. Many voluntary associations were radicalised too (including almost all the scientific societies noted above). Significantly, the only law passed in Tsarist time devoted to public organisations was issued by the Senate in the immediate aftermath of the first Russian Revolution, in March 1906. In the next few years, almost 5,000 new organisations, societies and unions were registered. However, once again this reforming, liberalising movement ran into opposition from the state and with the crisis brought about by World War 1, Russia experienced the double revolution (democratic, then socialist) of February and October 1917.

Early Russian charitable associations

Before 1917 Russia lacked a system of social security, and this gap was filled by mutual assistance organisations. This included financial or material support to groups such as widows, orphans, or victims of accidents at work; and “intellectual assistance” to various professional groups (libraries, concerts, literary evenings). Problems tackled included homelessness, abandoned children, crime, and so on. The societies undertook a range of activities familiar to today's NGOs. The Mozhaik Charitable Association provides an example of the comprehensive approach developed by many of them. Its aims were not simply to feed and care for children, but to teach work skills, find them work, and assist in the development of school education and distribution of textbooks. Later it opened a gymnasium (college) and a sewing workshop for girls, supporting their progress into teacher-training institutions.

In rural areas, the support of zemstvos (local authority units set up in the 1860s reform period) was particularly valuable, both as a source of grants for the needy, and for exchange of experience in social care approaches. In urban areas, mutual help associations helped workers and professionals accumulate funds with which to help victims of accidents at work, to pay for medical care or pensions. By the start of the 20th century, similar associations had been created for writers, artists, lecturers, schoolteachers, doctors, nurses, dentists, merchants, craftsmen, tailors, bakers and so on – with members paying regular dues.⁵

⁴ Bradley, J. 2009. *Voluntary Associations in Tsarist Russia: Science, Patriotism, and Civil Society*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

⁵ Examples taken from HSE. 2011. “Can the State Cope on Its Own? (in Russian)”

2.3 Civil society in the Soviet period

The Soviet period (1917 to the mid-1980s) is described by the HSE Report as the third stage in Russia's civil society development, notable for the "*nationalization of civil society institutions*". Again, there were stages when popular activity flowered. The Soviet arts, cultural and scientific avant-garde of the 1920s is well known, but less well known are the local movements, peasants' and proletarian organisations that emerged all around the country. For example, every settlement/district (*volost*) had its own Peasant Mutual Society and the Central Bureau of Proletstud catered to the welfare needs of students much as voluntary associations had done before the revolution.

However, in the 1930s this phase gave way to a period of repression and political regimentation – occasioned by the Soviet government's decision to forcibly collectivise agriculture and go for rapid industrialisation. This "*required state-oriented CSOs which were to drive the foundation of socialism*". The voluntary associations created in the 1920s "*offered alternative ways of solving social problems*" but the authorities "*doubted the utility of voluntary movements and the reliability of their participants.*" Thousands were shut down in the 1930s and new associations set up in their stead, as part of the government machine. Eventually only the Red Cross and Children's Fund remained from the original social assistance groups. New mass movements such as the Soviet Committee for Peace, the Union of Atheists or the Union of Women had an explicitly communist ideology.

It was not until the late 1950s-early 1960s that citizens' organisations of a less politicised type began to re-emerge, encouraged by Khrushchev's denunciation of Stalin and the political thaw that followed. Russian analysts have identified about 40 of these, operating mainly within the arts and scientific fields under the patronage of Communist Party bodies and subject to the latter's decisions on policy and personnel matters. By the Brezhnev period, associations were active among groups as varied as war veterans, professional designers and those involved in child welfare. Civil society now included the dissident movement. Dissidents developed various modes of resistance to the Soviet state – writing and publishing artistic or journalistic critiques of the regime, creating a variety of informal circles and discussion groups, and making statements on political and human rights issues that brought down considerable persecution on themselves. But they had many sympathisers and considerable impact on the political atmosphere in the country and its reputation abroad. The dissident movement included not only western-leaning liberals, but also strident nationalists and religious activists from many of the constituent republics of the USSR. The HSE study concludes: "*at the grassroots level, the shoots of civil society began to emerge*": that is, the commitment of citizens to self-organisation within socially oriented activities.

2.4 Transition period to date

As noted above, civil society played a huge role in dissident ideology in Eastern Europe and the USSR in the 1980s. When the communist regimes collapsed one after the other it seemed to many people that an entirely new society was being born. Many different analyses of "newly-created" civil society in the region were built around this view.

Twenty years later and with the benefit of new historical research, most experts in the region see things differently. The current stage of civil society development in Russia is a fourth stage, starting in the mid-1980s and continuing to the present day. The movement for *perestroika* and *glasnost* led by Gorbachev was designed to solve the USSR's pressing economic crisis (caused by the arms race and economic competition with the West) and to shore up the legitimacy of one-party rule. But it led instead to the collapse of the communist

system. Many of the most active civil society sectors today can trace their origins to the 1980s – not just the human rights groups, but also the environmental movement with its active networks among young people and in the regions. The adoption of a law on public associations in the late soviet period, supported by subsequent Russian Federation laws regulating public and charitable activity, opened the door to CSO registration for all-comers.

The role of foreign donors was very significant in the 1990s, enabling the transfer of a Western (primarily American) model of civil society to Russia. At the time the whole FSU region was in deep recession, with a 25-50% drop in GDP and production, political and intellectual links between the 15 former socialist republics in disarray. The HSE study describes the role of the state during the 1990s as “*benevolent non-interference*”; state budgetary support for CSOs was “*insignificant*”. However, under Yeltsin’s successor Putin, the environment for civil society changed significantly. On the one hand, Putin accelerated a process initiated under Yeltsin –government financing of the sector (mainly via contracting out social services to CSOs), and set up a national structure of Public Councils to dialogue with and co-opt the sector. On the other hand, in 2006 he introduced regulations limiting the influence of foreign donors. The study’s authors call this policy “*import substitution*”; the replacement of foreign models and funding by national programmes, self-organisation and local philanthropy. This paper will briefly indicate how successful this process (still quite new) has been.

3. Russian civil society today

3.1 General features of the sector

After two decades of transition, analysts of current developments in Russia are beginning to gain a balanced view of the civil society sector. *Russian Civil Society: A Critical Assessment* is one of the most thorough recent books on the sector.⁶ In a concluding chapter on “Tensions and Trajectories” the authors note the black-or-white nature of many analyses of civil society in Russia, while more attention to the detail shows that elements of continuity and change, tradition and innovation, exist alongside one another. Here we quote a small selection of the features that this important analysis identifies:

- civil society activists today are “*a strong minority of citizens*” who deserve more support
- Informal networks are important for civil society, especially in rural areas because they include a large membership and their ability and readiness to provide vital daily services, plus often good links with government
- Foreign funding has had a positive effect in many areas (for example, it helped open up dialogue on many issues like feminism, domestic violence and others)
- Mafia-type groupings have had a powerful and negative effect at all levels in Russia – even “*co-opting the role of civil society*”
- The millionaires or “oligarchs” that emerged during the 1990s preferred not to work through formal or wider business associations; hence they contributed little to civil society development.

The authors conclude that a “*more Russian form*” of civil society is emerging – a “*really existing*” civil society.⁷ The question is how to develop it further, from local to national level.

⁶ Evans Jr, A., L. Henry, and L. M. Sundstrom, (eds.) 2010. *Russian Civil Society: a Critical Assessment*. Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe.

⁷ Evans, Henry, and Sundstrom. 2010: 319.

The HSE team recently produced a similarly balanced view of civil society development in Russia, using the CIVICUS model with its five key dimensions of civil society, based on the results of a nationwide sociological survey and a range of individual and group interviews. A brief summary of the conclusions for each dimension is given below:

- Civic engagement: the level of public activity in stable periods is moderate, but CSOs have shown they can mobilize quickly when the external situation demands
- Level of organization: Russian civil society is still in a difficult period of organizational development
- Practice of values: CSO members and activists refer to non-violence, tolerance and internal democracy as being among the most important for the sector
- Perception of impact: the general image of civil society is not equal from internal and external points of view. CSOs themselves rate their social and political impact as higher than the scores given by external experts
- External environment: the majority of the population do not approve of corruption, tax evasion, and so on. These positive social attitudes could potentially act as a catalyst for further civil society development.⁸

3.2 The legal and political environment for civil society

The sources quoted above show a complex picture, with significant advances made and yet many problems remaining. This view is echoed by experts in NGO law working in the Siberian city of Novosibirsk, who pointed to the bias in many Western media reports. These, they argue, either select data from Moscow (not representative of Russia as a whole) or from particular controversial sectors like human rights and election monitoring (rather than the social or economic sectors).⁹ “*Overly generous assessments of Russian democracy*” in the Yeltsin period have, they claim, given way to misleadingly negative commentary on the Putin period. They cite three key features of the external environment for NGOs where a more careful analysis would be useful.

Registration of NGOs. Russian Federation Law No.18-FZ was adopted in 2006 and was heralded as an “*unprecedented assault on the work of human rights groups*” (Human Rights Watch Europe and CA Division). Freedom House noted “*the government intensified crackdown on NGOs, particularly those receiving foreign funding*”.¹⁰ Javeline and Lindemann-Komarova note, by contrast, that legal requirements for NGOs in Russia, particularly financial reporting, have always been onerous and surveys carried out in 2007 indicated that Law No.18 was no more burdensome for human rights and advocacy groups than other NGOs. On the other hand, four out of five NGOs in 2007 did not supply reports in the required format by the official deadline – which left them vulnerable to forced liquidation. A survey of NGO leaders in the same year asked them to name the main sources of pressure on their organisation. “*Not enough money, material resources*” topped the list with 59.1%, while government pressure came very low (2.9%).¹¹

Local self-government. At the same time as the rules for NGO registration were changed, another law came out ‘On General Organisational Principles of Local Self-Government in the

⁸ HSE 2011: 19-36

⁹ Javeline, D., and S.Lindemann-Komarova. 2010. “A Balanced Assessment of Russian Civil Society.” *Journal of International Affairs* 63 (2).

¹⁰ Javeline and Lindemann-Komarova 2010, 173.

¹¹ The surveys referred to were carried out by the independent (US-funded) organization ICNL. The same article notes that in 2007, 2,600 Russian NGOs went into involuntary liquidation that year (out of 675,000 NGOs registered around the country that year). To register a NGO costs 2,000 rubles (around USD 65) plus legal advice – the latter is available free from NGO resource centres and a number of websites.

Russian Federation'. Law No.131-FZ boosts citizens' right to participate in local self-government bodies and Javeline and Lindemann-Komarova call this a "*huge stride for Russia in recognizing the value of citizen participation in governance*". At the same time they note scepticism remains because many procedures (like public hearings and referenda) can easily be manipulated. A lot depends on the experience and influence of individual civil society leaders and organisations.

Consultative mechanisms. Set up by Putin in 2004, the national Public Chamber has 126 members, selected in equal numbers by the President, public organisations, and Russia's regions. The aim was to develop the space for civil society and intersectoral dialogue. Gradually, this model has been extended across Russia. Critics said they would prove to be mere "window-dressing to legitimize the government's increasingly authoritarian policies", but at local level many NGO supporters have proved willing to give them a try. (A survey in Novosibirsk found that 60% of activists would participate if asked, while 16% wouldn't, 181).¹²

4. Regional case studies: experience from Urals and Siberia

The authors of this paper have a special connection with the Urals. One of us was born in the Komi Republic (NW Urals), the other visited several times in from the mid-1990s within a variety of development programmes and research initiatives. In the 1990s, the handover of a variety of services from factories and enterprises to local government had only just taken place, and international assistance in setting up new health, social services and education departments, plus the beginnings of CSO involvement in social programmes, were much appreciated by local partner organisations in Russia.

Ten years later, visits undertaken for this paper went eastwards, taking in a central belt of Siberia from Novosibirsk in Western Siberia to Ulan Ude, capital of the Republic of Buryatia, east of Lake Baikal. The rest of this paper is based on information collected during these visits, and illustrates the general points about civil society made above with examples from two major regions in the borderlands between Europe and Asia. It considers the current priorities of 'organised civil society' (i.e. registered NGOs) and the wider mass of civil/political activists campaigning on the key current issues in Russia. This is necessarily a brief description and the reader should not draw extensive conclusions from the examples given.

4.1 Civil society and local government in Perm

People both in and far beyond Perm regard this as one of the friendliest, most innovative regions in Russia for civil society. A system of 'social orders', social services contracts let out by local government to NGOs, has been running for over ten years and NGO representatives play a significant role in designing programmes, approving contracts and monitoring the process. There is an active Public Chamber bringing together government and civil society.

Nonetheless, in Perm region as a whole, many serious economic and social problems remain. While the region has some advanced industries (including chemicals, mining, and machine building), a recent United Nations report on human development noted a continuing fall in the population, low life expectancy among men, and problems of half-deserted villages and polluted mono-industrial towns.¹³ This is less on display in the regional capital, Perm city,

¹² Javeline and Lindemann-Komarova 2010, 180-81.

¹³ United Nations Human Development Report on Perm, 2010. Доклад о человеческом развитии в Пермском крае, 2010, ред Бобылев С.Н., Пермь, НП Профессиональный Интерес.

where there are many signs of increasing prosperity and a concern for good governance. The efforts of local government to work closely with civil society are shown, for example, by the opening of some 20 new community centres with rent-free space for NGO offices and a hall for local events. Apparently, the idea came from exchange visits by local officials to UK.

Another example of local intersectoral collaboration is an independent NGO, the Grani Analytical Centre, that specialises in governance issues and has begun working for a variety of local and federal agencies, for example the Ministry of Economic Development, to evaluate efficiency and accountability in government. One study is monitoring the work of the Federal Anti-Monopoly Service; another piece of work is on land registration services in five regions of Russia; a third was on how well citizen's participation works at municipal level.

Putin's first period in government became well known for his re-centralising policies: the new President argued that this was essential to stop Russia falling apart – to stand up to regionalist tendencies and in particular to reverse the military failures suffered in the First Chechen War. However, during the same decade some initial steps were made in delegating power to local government; for example, like some other Russian cities, Perm experimented with directly elected mayors. In summer 2012 it seemed likely that a newly re-elected Putin might reverse his policy of appointing the governors in Russia's super-regions. The new law on local self-government (mentioned above) is another important step, but one that will require civil society and political pressure to really work.

Perm is also notable for its attempts to promote the liberal and human rights agenda. One example is its support for the biennial 'Pilorama' festival – held two hours' drive north of Perm in one of Russia's most notorious forced labour camps, organised by a coalition of human rights activists and organisations including the national human rights organisation Memorial. In summer 2011, the festival featured a wide range of celebrities, from *perestroika*-era politicians to rock stars, as well as providing a forum for political debate in which civic groups as well as political parties played an active role. Another example is the efforts of the local authorities to promote Perm as a centre of progressive art and culture – the Perm "cultural breakthrough" as they call it. There is a modern art museum in the old Kama River Station, a highly visible city graffiti programme, a controversial new city emblem, a multicultural, multi-disciplinary White Nights festival, and a commitment to maintain and diversify Perm's musical traditions. The result of this almost everyone in Perm seems to have a view on modern art – for or against – and this is becoming a significant factor in the city's perception of itself, in its civic consciousness and the promotion of a more open, liberal approach.

4.2 Government funding for civil society: the Siberian experience

The NGO resource centre in Perm is closely involved in new government funding initiatives for the civil society sector – as are many experienced NGOs and individual experts across the Urals and Siberia. A special role in this effort is played by the Siberian Civic Initiatives Support Centre (SCISC) in Novosibirsk. With over three million people, Novosibirsk is the third largest city in the Russian Federation. Situated on the Ob River, this is a major centre for machine building and the automobile industry in particular.

SCISC was one of the first generation of NGO resource centres, set up with US funding in the mid-1990s and serving a network of similar organisations in eleven administrative regions across Siberia. In 1996, the Centre received US\$600,000 from USAID to organise one of the first small grant competitions in Russia. It used this money to open discussions with the Novosibirsk authorities about government funding for NGOs – eventually gaining an agreement to match the US contribution. Novosibirsk Oblast and the city of Novosibirsk

awarded grants to NGOs totalling 18 million rubles in 2007, and the funding pool has now topped 35 million rubles (US\$1.1 million). Public consultative committees, neighbourhood councils, and local volunteer schemes have been developed as part of the same programme.

Alongside the national Public Chamber (see above) there are now over 50 similar bodies across Russia. New resources provided by central government enable them to make contacts and study processes and results across the whole civil sphere. A report commissioned in 2010 by the Public Chamber in the Siberian federal region (*okrug*) on the number of registered NGOs¹⁴, analysed them by type and sector, and devoted other sections to political parties, youth movements, trade unions and veterans associations. The report shows that civil society development in the region is quite uneven. For example, anti-corruption committees were reported to be active in the Siberian cities of Omsk, Krasnoyarsk and Irkutsk. Budget hearings and citizen's audits took place in several areas – for example in Altai region in the discussion of a new federal law on the police. By contrast, there is still no chamber in the Autonomous Republic of Buryatia.

According to the umbrella NGO, Association for Social Information (ASI), public chambers should be seen as a bridge between the government and the people.¹⁵ They are “invited spaces” with a mainly top-down function – but they can be used, for example, to lobby environmental issues with private sector companies. An example of this is in Siberia, where quite suddenly a broad coalition emerged to oppose a new pipeline being laid on the northern shore of Lake Baikal. Victory in the campaign against proposals by Russian oil company Yukos and its successor Transneft, was due not just to the citizens and environmental groups who organised meetings and collected thousands of signatures to oppose the plan, but also to local government leaders who decided to support them. In April 2006 Putin responded to local pressure by ordering the re-routing of the pipeline.

4.3 Moscow and the regions

In all of these developments, a clear gap can be seen between advanced and less advanced elements in civil society and government. The rural areas lag behind the cities, the remote regions lag behind the industrial centres. The character of political opposition to the regime is quite different in the regions. As the demonstrations of autumn 2011 and spring 2012 showed, present-day ‘dissidents’ in Moscow and St Petersburg tend to be middle-class, liberal and western-leaning. However, in the Urals and Siberia, many of the most strident activists are from the communist and nationalist camps.

This is not to say that pro-democracy forces should be discounted. Thus in Novosibirsk we were told by NGO Golos (Voice) that election monitoring was actively and efficiently organised across the nine regions of Siberia and the Far East which they supervised. Activists from a new radical opposition grouping in the city were enthusiastic about the “*first mass movement on this scale since 1993*” and albeit limited success in placing demands for greater election process transparency on government – for example, video monitors in all election rooms. In the wider civil sphere, a coalition called “Regions” was recently set up to campaign for more attention to organisations and issues outside Moscow and St Petersburg. NGOs in Siberia clearly feel excluded from the inner circle of Moscow-based NGOs; representatives of the coalition now sit on various committees to ensure more equal access to government decision-making and funds.

¹⁴ Overall, the number of NGOs dropped slightly because of tighter government requirements for registration and reporting, as mentioned above.

¹⁵ Presentation on NGO development by ASI president Elena Topoleva at the Berr Trust conference, “So much and so little: progress and prospects in health, welfare and the role of NGOs in Russia”, London, November 18, 2011.

4.4 Civic activism and social movements

During visits to the Urals and Siberia in 2011-12, we spoke to civic activists working on a wide range of issues. At the Pilorama Festival, activists debated democracy and privatisation, issues on which there was little general agreement. A visit to a youth ecological camp in 2012 showed that environmental groups are still active but have difficulty institutionalising some gains; for example, despite a much lobbying in the 1990s, it has been impossible to secure a satisfactory place for environmental studies in the school curriculum.

In Novosibirsk, Irkutsk and Ulan Ude, we interviewed social and environmental sector activists, including representatives of informal groups linked with the Institute for Collective Action. One of these, an activist in the pensioners' movement, stated that he had been involved in over 250 court hearings in the past year! The restrictions on street protests are such that it has become necessary to apply officially for any picket or street demonstration. The main actions he described included a campaign to force the city authorities to adopt a more flexible system of free/subsidised travel for pensioners on public transport; a campaign to stop the cutting down of trees to make way for a new hotel in a local park; and an anti-corruption action against the management of a major cement factory in the city. He and his friends, many of them retired people, had succeeded in making contact with a wider protest constituency during the upsurge of political activity the previous winter. On one occasion they had assembled almost 7,000 people for a demonstration around the elections. But within a few weeks the younger people disappeared again and it was back to the "regulars".

In Irkutsk, the editor of an independent local newspaper *Narodny Kontrol* (People's Control) described efforts to highlight and uncover local corruption and malpractice. He sees his newspaper's main goal as being to mobilise public opinion and influence government. The paper had printed an extra 200,000 copies of its latest issue for circulation around Irkutsk city and oblast. "If I can help people to get a sense of what is going on – in their own head, in their courtyard, in the city as a whole – then I have achieved my aim", he told us.

The report of the Siberian Public Chamber has some interesting comments on the topic of protest. Analysing recent public opinion surveys on citizens' dissatisfaction with the government, it notes that the main causes for dissatisfaction are price rises, unemployment and housing problems. Some 32% of the population defined itself as "poor" and only 43% described the current economic situation as "positive". Some 900 protest actions were recorded in the Siberian region in 2010, with 75,000 participants in total, the majority organised by political parties. But the report also notes examples of more spontaneous protests. One of these was the campaign for kindergarten provision. In meetings across Siberia, it was interesting to hear first-hand accounts of a fightback 20 years after the mass closure of childcare institutions during the 1990s. A childcare activist in Irkutsk explained that one of the consequences of the federal government's pro-natalist policies is an increase in the birth rate locally, with some 20,000 families now on the waiting list for nursery places. A new movement led by young mothers is called 38mama.ru is very active and uses a variety of informal means including new/social media to gather support.

4.5 Problems of coordination on social and political issues

If we accept that civil society is a kind of "space", we will probably agree that it does not "belong" to any single group – political activists, local problem solving organisations, expert or professional associations, etc. But the question remains, to what extent can civil society can raise issues that challenge society as a whole? By using Russia's anti-globalisation movement as an example, we can examine to what extent a social movement of this kind is

able to unite activists or present what Gramsci would call a counter-hegemonic project to the main line of government and business sector thinking.

The Russian Anti-Globalisation Movement

One of the campaigns that could potentially unite activists promoting progressive or radical causes is the anti-globalisation movement. Russian anti-globalism has a long pedigree, with roots in nationalist, Slavophile and conservative thinkers who up to the Bolshevik revolution promoted Russia as a special civilisational centre, opposing westernisation and what they saw as its evils – immorality and commercialisation of life. According to a leading spokesman for Russian anti-globalism – or as he prefers to call it, alter-globalism - the main enemy is neo-liberalism and world domination by the USA¹⁶. The alternative is provided by grassroots social movements including workers' organisations, pensioners and housing movements, environmentalists, anti-debt campaigners, and so on. Some of these social movements have a local focus and an everyday social or political character, while others focus on higher-level national or international policy issues and opportunities for action; including protests around the World Trade Organisation (WTO) and participation in World Social Forum events.

Anti-global mass actions in Russia began in November 2001 with the country's first street protest against membership of WTO. In the following year, similar demonstrations were held when George Bush visited Russia and in 2006 during the G8 meeting in St Petersburg. These protests were not as large as demonstrations held in London, Paris, or Prague; nor did they escalate into Gandhi-type non-violent action.¹⁷ Nonetheless, they were very new for post-1991 Russia – anti-capitalist actions taking a lead from global civil society. Indeed, joining WTO carries many risks for Russia. The manufacturing sector has been in recession since the early 1990s, and faces huge competition from the West and China; while agriculture will always require special government support because of Russia's harsh northern climate.

Siberian Social Forums. One of the high points of social movement activism in Russia in recent years was the series of social forum meetings held during the 2000s. Five forums were held in Siberia in 2003-08, in Barnaul, Novosibirsk, Tomsk and Irkutsk; and two national social forums were organised in Moscow. An account of one of the forums held in Novosibirsk shows the variety of participants and the difficulty of agreeing aims. Some 250 participants attended this event from 13 regions. Izhevsk and Perm were described as examples of active social movement coordination; in the latter, workers' hostel residents had organised a successful campaign to privatise their living accommodation. Another important action discussed was the strike by car workers in the city of Togliatti. An ecological section at the forum attracted 50 people. In its modern version, Russian anti-globalism is supported not just by libertarians and the 'new left' but also by nationalist forces. This is a similar situation to that faced by the pro-democracy movement. It means that the movement is split outside parliament as well as having limited support from the political parties inside parliament. A further challenge, according to analysts at the Institute of Globalisation and Social Movements¹⁸, is that the Russian movement lacks internationalism and has been unable to develop strong links with other global campaigns (such as the Occupy movement).

¹⁶ Buzgalin A. 2006. «Антиглобализм»: в поисках позитивной альтернативы новой империи. Available at www.alternativy.ru/ru/node/76, March 3.

¹⁷ The repertoire of protest action in Russia is increasingly colourful, especially anarchist and punk actions (e.g. Pussy Riot) aimed at ridiculing establishment positions.

¹⁸ Kagarlitsky, B. 2006. "Петербургская повесть." «Взгляд» July 17. For more on national and international solidarity campaigns, see www.ikd.ru and www.igso.ru.

5. Conclusion: results and future prospects

In December 2011, Russia was admitted to WTO (18 years after first applying) and all that remained was for the Duma to ratify the agreement. In March 2012, Putin returned as President for a new seven-year term. Thus, for the alter-globalisation movement as for other dissident forces, a new period of struggle lies ahead to win a greater degree of social and economic justice and a more democratic society in Russia. On the other hand, Putin has promised to prioritise social issues and CSOs are well placed to work for positive results in this area. This is a kind of “crossroads” for Russian civil society – will activists and organisations collaborate or conflict with government? It is likely that many will opt for the first of these strategies, so they face the challenge of how to resist incorporation and maintain their own agenda during the negotiations.

Both the democracy and the alter-globalisation movements face the challenge of how to coordinate their activities, combine different viewpoints, and communicate more effectively with the general public. The activists involved in social issues at local level have put energy and ideas into setting up grants contests, ensuring transparency in awarding contracts. Now they need to focus on the development, implementation and monitoring of longer term programmes – whether carried out by NGOs or government itself. Only a truly independent position will enable them to work effectively in difficult areas like anti-corruption, anti-racism or the protection of minority rights. With all these challenges and changes, another priority is research and reflection on civil society development. Here too there is work in progress and this study has attempted to illustrate and learn from it.

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