



POLICY BRIEF (4)

Russian Civil Society Under Threat – How to Respond?

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Introduction

Civil society in Russia is under serious threat. This is a widespread perception but not wholly accurate. There are many NGOs and other civil society actors working in the non-political sphere in Russia without any major problems. A first question, therefore, is the definition of civil society. After discussing the nature of civil society, this paper considers current developments with regard to civil society in Russia and assesses how the Russian authorities provide funding and support for this sector. Finally, the paper suggest a strategy for the EU to follow: retaining a critical stance towards the Kremlin's persecution of certain NGOs, holding Russia to account under its legal obligations, and increasing and broadening support to other sectors of civil society.

What is civil society?

A healthy civil society is considered an integral part of any democratic system of governance. Along with free and fair elections, and accountable institutions, it ensures that the voices of citizens are included in policy-making. A healthy civil society, however, depends on the rule of law, the separation of powers and a free and independent media. Civil society can be defined as a public space for citizens to engage in collective debate and self-expression, and where public opinions that influence public policy are formed. This space lies between the family and the state, is independent from the state and is legally protected. Fundamentally, civil society is a medium, in which the social contracts between citizens and political and economic centres of power are negotiated and reproduced. Civil society can thus include many different types of groups and activities such as membership organizations, charities, think-tanks, neighbourhood associations, informal movements and faith-based groups. Their key characteristic is independence from the government.

Russian civil society

Russian civil society has had a difficult birth. Although philanthropy and charity have been for long part of Russian history, the milieu from which Russian civil society emerged, has been a very non-beneficial one from historical, political and cultural perspectives. The Soviet system suppressed public debate, eliminated critical thinking and denied space for civil society to develop. It also left behind flourishing corruption, informal networks often based on former security personnel, and disengaged citizens who were reluctant to participate in public initiatives. In post-Soviet Russia NGOs activity emerged as a response to the social need of tens of millions who felt marginalised by the State incapability to provide adequate support as a result of the enormous social costs of transition.¹ Though the NGO sector has gone through a process of rapid growth, many Russians still hold negative views of it. Given the widespread fear about the future, many are unwilling to take public initiatives and engage in collective action According to sociologists Lev Gudkov, Boris Dubin and Natalia Zorkay, “today's Russian society is exclusively dominated by values of survival that imply passive or reactive behaviour to social change”.²

Under President Putin, the state has become involved in selective justice, imprisoning opposition leaders, tightening media censorship, and using force against peaceful demonstrators. Stigmatization of NGOs that are partly financed by Western sources escalated in 2012. A whole package of new restrictive laws has been adopted including a law on ‘foreign agents’, criminal liability, including for journalists, for openly criticizing government officials, limitation of freedom of assembly by imposing high financial sanctions and imprisonment. The crackdown on Russian civil society organisations and the set of new bills are exacerbating the feeling of mistrust and helplessness within Russian society. The recent government investigations of over 600 NGOs led to the classification of many organizations as “foreign agents” and threatened their survival with fines, preventing them from accepting foreign funding. Among non-profits groups that are required to register as ‘foreign agents’ because they conduct political activities are the Levada Centre, Golos, Association of Soldiers’ Mothers, Public Verdict and many others, including from the regions.

¹ Anna Skvortsova's contribution “Russian civil society at crossroads” at the open discussion “Russian civil society at Risk – How Can International Solidarity be of Help?” held in Berlin on April 10, 2013. http://eu-russia-csf.org/fileadmin/Docs/Russian_Civil_Society_at_the_crossroads_10.04.2013.pdf

² U. Schmid Post-Apocalypse, Intermediality and Social Distrust in Russian Pop Culture, p.4 Russian Analytical Digest N.126, 2013. L.D. Gudkov, B.V. Dubin, N.A. Zorkaya, *Postsovietsky chelovek i grazhdanskoe obshchestvo*. Moscow 2008.

At the same time the Kremlin has become adept at building up its own supportive NGOs providing its favourites with generous funding. Other non-political NGOs are usually allowed to operate in peace as long as they do not seek to criticise the government. Huge subsidies are allocated to socially-oriented NGOs by means of presidential grants and regional programmes to support civil society. In 2012, 57 federal regions approved such programmes and disbursed over 900 million roubles, an equivalent of 22 million euro³.

Russia also plays an active role in supporting civil society in the former Soviet states too, financing not-for-profit organizations and other non-state actors to project its influence. These countries, in particularly Ukraine, constitute a strategic interest for Russia in view of Moscow's intention to expand the Eurasian Customs Union and subsequently to create a wider, more political 'Eurasian Union'. Thus, various foundations provide funding to youth associations, media clubs, university groups in Ukraine, Moldova and Armenia. These groups are often better at outreach and try to work on the grass-root level than Western-funded NGOs. In Ukraine, for example such cluster of groups actively cooperates with Russian youth groups close to the Russian government, such as the Russian Youth Public Council [*Molodiozhnaja Obshchestvennaja Palata*]. Some receive funding from the Russian Gorchakov Foundation established under the "patronage" of Kremlin with the engagement of high-ranking Russian government officials on the board. Such groups that are active in Ukraine include Hammer of Truth, Young Eurasia, and Youth Public Council.

In line with creating 'managed' democracy inside Russia, the Kremlin would also like to create 'managed' civil society. On one hand, creating and financing its own pro-governmental NGOs inside Russia and on another hand, mimicking Western-style NGO funding abroad to sustain and promote its influence.

What complicates the situation even further is that many Russians, agree that Russian human rights groups should not receive funding from abroad and believe that by receiving Western funding such groups try to influence Russia's internal policy. The negative term of 'foreign agent' goes back to Soviet times and is one reason why only 19 per cent of Russians believe that NGOs are useful for the country⁴.

Such negative public image of human rights groups contrasts with the growing informal

³ Anna Skvortsova, Challenges of the NGOs sector in Russia, 2012, <http://www.crno.ru/>

⁴ People Believed in Foreign Agents, http://www.vedomosti.ru/politics/news/12121261/narod_poveril_v_agentov

activism and self-help of Russian citizens. Forest fires in 2011 and flooding in 2012 triggered volunteering and donations from individuals. Urban citizens more than before organize themselves to protect green spaces, to support needed children or demand improvements to roads. Civic participation through volunteering and donations is growing with 17 per cent Russians volunteering and 7 per cent giving charitable donations.⁵ Internet is actively used to disseminate information, mobilize, and create discussion groups, in particularly among youth. These new growing trends shifted focus among activists from political to local issues, led to emergence of new forms of civic expressions (satire, festivals, street performance) and widened public space.⁶

EU Strategy

In these diverse and complicated circumstances the EU should adopt a multi-pronged strategy making use of conditionality and seeking new avenues to support civil society.

First, the crackdown against civil society in Russia should be made the top priority in the official EU-Russia dialogue. The EU should make clear that this crackdown goes contrary to the very essence of EU principles and values and that it fundamentally undermines EU-Russia relations.

Second, EU leaders should express their disagreement with the Russian government in public, not only at meetings with them behind closed doors. Publishing statements on websites is important but not enough.

Third, the EU should continue to express solidarity with civil society groups under threat in Russia. Leaders from Germany, Sweden, the Netherlands and the EU have all made public statements critical of Putin's approach. Chancellor Merkel publicly chastised Putin at the Hannover Fair in 2013. This should continue and EU leaders should always be prepared to meet civil society representatives on visits to Russia.

Fourth, the EU should use all fora to press Russia to uphold the standards and judgements of the European institutions to which it belongs, notably the OSCE and the Council of Europe. The EU is asking Russia to respect its legal commitments – nothing more, nothing less.

⁵ World Giving Index 2012, Charities Aids Foundation

⁶ Grani Study on Non-Political Activism, 2012

Fifth, EU should be prepared to protect Russian civic activists when they face harassment and persecution, including by provision of temporary shelter in Europe and in the last resort by providing asylum.

Sixth, the EU should recognise and understand that it is more powerful when it speaks with one voice. In addition Russia needs the EU as market for its energy more than the EU needs Russia. The EU should thus be more self-confident in its dealings with Russia.

Finally, the EU (and Western donors) need a new policy thrust for civil society assistance in Russia. It would call on donors to make longer term, conditional commitments to build civil society from the bottom up, rather than, as now, relying so much on a "trickle down" approach too dependent on few groups or established ruling elites. It would mean that financial support and capacity building assistance is spread to a cross-section of civil society groups and also to the regions. There is a danger that Western donors channel most of their assistance to a few selected NGOs rather than a broader spectrum.

At present there is too little effort put into programmes aimed at encouraging citizens to be actively involved and to embrace their daily democratic responsibilities. The NGO insider groups, because they are 'preaching to the converted' are failing to help citizens to understand policies, so leaving them almost powerless. Funding should also be targeted to support informal grass-root citizen initiatives such as cultural or educational bodies, faith-based groups, business associations, especially independent smaller and regional groups and informal community activists. Rather than a top-down approach, whereby local NGOs are forced to work with the government, a bottom up policy is needed that would include, for example, bringing EU grassroots organizations into programme design and decision-making.

The EU should move beyond hiring professional consulting companies and invite high-impact non-profits to share their know-how in community organizing, digital mobilisation, membership development, cooperation with business could inspire new generation of civic leadership in the region. Non-conventional actors such as youth groups, students' associations and universities, citizens' initiative groups, intellectual circles, parent association, cultural festivals, schools and religious organizations that pursue charitable and community goals should be included in the game.

Crucially donors need to consider incorporating conditionality into their support for NGOs,

partly based on criteria including connections with citizens, connectivity with other groups, buy-in from local communities. This, of course, would clearly require another, far reaching innovation, namely long-term donor commitment, which recognises that neither democracy nor civil society is an instant coffee.

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This project is supported by:



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