



POLICY BRIEF (1)

Why Civil Society Matters for EU-Russia relations

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Introduction

The mass demonstrations in Moscow, St Petersburg and other Russian cities have shown a desire for greater civil engagement by the Russian population. At the same time there have been wide-scale protests in many EU member states against the austerity measures imposed by governments. At the global level NGOs such as Greenpeace or Human Rights Watch have unprecedented influence. NGOs are invited to meet political leaders in the margins of summits in Rio and elsewhere. Is this a new golden age for civil society? Where is civil society in the EU-Russia relationship?

Although there are different definitions of civil society there is broad agreement that civil society covers individuals and organisations that are independent of government. NGOs, charities and voluntary organisations are normally considered pillars of civil society. Some would include the judiciary, universities, the church, trades unions and trade associations under the civil society umbrella. This policy brief seeks to explain why civil society is important for a healthy, modern society - and to assess the state of civil society in the EU-Russia relationship. It recommends a stronger role for the European Parliament in overseeing civil society developments.

Defining civil society

Academics and experts are divided on the definition of civil society. The term entered public discourse in Europe in the 1980s partly due to the rise of the Green movement. However its tradition is much richer and longstanding. Philosophers from Socrates to de Tocqueville to Marx have discussed the importance of the *civitas*. Some experts define civil society as all activity outside the government and state apparatus. Some include the family while others exclude it. Sometimes the term is used in the more general sense to include the elements that make up a democratic society e.g. freedom of speech, the rule of law, etc. Volunteering is often considered a defining characteristic of the organizations that constitute civil society. Most civil society organisations have to struggle for finance. Some receive funding from governments but this brings the danger of being labelled a GONGO - government organised NGO! Despite the problems of definition, what is important for this paper is that both EU and Russian leaders recognise the importance of civil society – even though there are huge differences in attitudes towards civil society.

Civil society and democracy

Most experts agree on the close relationship between civil society and a genuine democracy. There is a consensus that civil society facilitates better awareness and a more informed citizenry, who

make better voting choices, participate in politics, and hold government more accountable as a result. NGOs help build social capital, trust and shared values, which are transferred into the political sphere and help to hold society together. For these reasons the EU and its member states encourage civil society through regular consultation processes and often by funding their activities. Many such as Oxfam, Médecins sans Frontières, Save the Children receive considerable official funding. Others such as Amnesty International prefer to rely on private/public donations. As mentioned earlier, genuine democracy cannot exist without a close interaction with civil society. However, in both the EU and Russia, there are many cases, when this interaction is significantly limited as a result of attacks and harassment of human rights defenders. This is a special concern of the EU-Russia Civil Society Forum which, through a number of activities, advocates the effective, independent and public investigation of such cases as well as supports the work of human rights defenders and seeks to ensure preventive mechanism of their protection.

Civil society in the EU-Russia relationship

The importance of civil society in the EU-Russia relationship was recognised in the Partnership for Modernisation (PfM) which called for ‘the effective functioning of the judiciary, strengthening the fight against corruption, promoting people-to-people links, and enhancing dialogue with civil society to foster participation of individuals and business.’ In his speeches at least, President Medvedev was a strong advocate of a greater role for civil society. In 2008 he told the Public Chamber that he wanted civil society groups to help scrutinize legislation before it came into force, saying officials were not always able to assess the social impact of new laws. In his farewell speech in 2012 he again appealed for a ‘more political diversity and direct participation of citizens in political processes.’ He added that ‘this will not lead to a return of chaos, but will make government stronger and more effective.’ Unfortunately Medvedev was not very effective in promoting change while in office (as he was in office and not power).

At the last EU-Russia summit in June, President Putin reaffirmed Russia’s commitment to all aspects of the PfM and surprised participants by welcoming the new EU-Russia Civil Society Forum. But Putin is more associated with restricting the rights of NGOs, especially those involved in human rights issues. He introduced measures in 2005 following the Orange Revolution and again in 2012 following the mass demonstrations protesting the Duma elections. There have also been recent moves against the gay community and laws that could threaten freedom of the internet. The EU protested on each occasion but with little effect.

The Way Forward

While the EU should continue to press Russia on its UN/Council of Europe/OSCE commitments it should also put its own house in order. Some member states can rightly be criticised for poor standards whether with regard to the judiciary, the media or minority rights.

It should also be possible to focus on a positive EU-Russia agenda involving civil society from both sides. The EU-Russia Civil Society Forum has a number of priority fields including combating racism, xenophobia and sexual discrimination, the environment, visa facilitation, transparency of police, community development, protecting human rights defenders and election monitoring.

The EU and member states should be encouraged to maintain support for civil society actors in the EU and Russia. The European Parliament has an important role to play in monitoring the state of civil society in the EU and Russia; highlighting attacks on civil society; and by raising civil society issues with counterparts in the Duma.

Annex: policy papers of the EU-Russia Civil Society Forum (CSF)

The CSF has already been active in producing a number of policy papers with regard to civil society and EU-Russia relations. The following gives an indication of the range and scope of the policy papers. A full list is available at <http://eu-russia-csf.org/home/general-assemblies/122011-warsaw/policy-papers.html>

Human Rights Defenders

Following an EP resolution of 17 June 2010 on human rights defenders, the CSF [policy paper](#) called for effective, independent and public investigation into cases of attacks and harassment of human rights defenders. It proposed a number of recommendations to improve the protection of human rights defenders.

Implementing ECHR Judgements

Another [policy paper](#) examined how the EU and Russia could effectively execute decisions of the ECHR, calling for more transparency in the execution of judgements of the court.

Environment

On the environmental side the working group [recommended](#) the EU and Russia to step up their presently weak efforts to negotiate a meaningful new global climate treaty in Durban and at the Rio+20 Summit.

Civil responsibility

On civic responsibility the working group [called for](#) the establishment of an infrastructure for civil activities, development of civic education in schools, and training new generation of public officials in productive and responsible interaction with community groups.

It was also [stressed](#) that citizens and their associations should regain the right to act as committed participants in change processes.

Democratic structures and processes

Another [policy paper](#) also called on the EU and Russia to join the Open Government Partnership (OGP), the international initiative for development of state institutions' transparency and accountability; to allow greater access to information on police activities, and to fix standards for enabling official information disclosure in machine-readable formats appropriate for further usage and development.

Other ideas focused on the [public control over the electoral process](#) and [visa policy](#) facilitation and liberalisation.

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