Ivan Kurilla
Volgograd State University

Russian Civil Society in History

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Towards better understanding of Civil Society in Russia

Concept of Civil Society was re-discovered some 15-20 years ago when Eastern Europe initiated its westward way and tried to understand the reasons of the difference between two types of society. The concept soon became very popular because it seemingly explained the problems of evolution of the societies in the Central and Eastern Europe and Russia after the collapse of Communism.

Variety of definitions of the Civil Society in the recent scholarship has exceeded the possibility of citing them in a brief article. However, there are several major features that characterize the Civil Society, such as division between state and society, between coercive power and economics, an existence of horizontally organized structures and networks independent of state. One of the most famous (and wrong) definitions of civil society springs up from juxtaposition of the society and the state. However, it resonated to the Russian tradition and became very popular in Russia. (Paradoxically, the definition is especially spread in Anglo-Saxon scholarship, while neither United Kingdom nor United States did know real alienation between state and society for centuries).

When planning the activity in “democracy building” in Russia, the Western governments and foundations started with the idea of the Civil Society as it existed in their own countries, basing their understanding on the wide variety of non-governmental organizations (NGOs). In Russia, the number of NGOs and people engaged in their activities was (and still is) very small. So, the support of NGOs became one of the first priorities in promotion of Civil Society in Russia (the other priorities included, for instance, judicial reform aimed at establishing Rule of Law in Russia).

However, the foundation money poured into Russian NGOs was not as fruitful as it was expected. The analysis of the problems may be found in many recent articles. One of the views – one can call it pessimistic – consists in the assertion that the Civil Society in Russia was absolutely absent, so, the task to build it from scratch is very difficult one and requires change of generations to get any positive result. New term was invented – that of uncivil society, aimed at description of societies that do not possess features of [Western Style] Civil Society.

However, there is still a difference between really uncivil societies based upon tribalism or other non-Western societal structures and societies that for centuries were experiencing modernization efforts from the colonial metropolises or – as it was in Russian case – from its own state.

I will not re-tell the story of the use of the concept but rather analyze some features of Russian society that made it difficult to project Western approaches to Russia. I dare to say that much more elements of Civil Society do exist in Russia and they may become the basis of its own model of Civil Society that would differ from Anglo-Saxon variant.

To understand it one should examine Russian history.

Historical heritage

While civil societies in the Western Europe were the results of the internal development of the respective traditional societies, Russian society never reached that level of self-organization. Since, at least, reforms of Peter the Great in the first quarter of
the 18th Century, Russian state took the lead and started modernization of the country from above.

Reforms that were aimed at society usually followed the reforms of the state. After Peter I had reformed the State, Catherine the Great proclaimed immunity of Russian nobility from an arbitrary prosecution. After Nicholas I had attempted at strengthening the state and modernizing its economy, his son Alexander II abolished serfdom, established jury trials, and introduced local governments (zemstvos). Even in the Soviet Union, after Stalin had made country the second superpower, Nikita Khrushchev permitted social mobility (especially important for Soviet peasantry) and tried to enhance the living standards of Russians.

In all the modernizing efforts the military and economic strength was the priority of the state; however, at least in some instances, the state created the institutions that strengthen also Russian society. It founded and supported universities and public schools, promoted education and business associations, even helped to create trade unions and – in some periods – strengthen the Orthodox Church. Each of those institutes was only partially functional: universities had little of self-governing and were not the centers of public expertise, zemstvos had no political authority, while Soviet trade unions had no right to challenge the employer (the only employer was the Soviet state). The dependency upon the state (the creator of universities, zemstvos, juries, trade-unions, zhensovets etc.) was the major flaw of all such institutions. However, that functional imperfection is not a sufficient reason to exclude those organizations from our analysis. In its modernizing efforts Russian state has introduced civic elements into Russia and pressed upon Russian society to behave as civil one (notwithstanding the state goals the logic of such elements forced them to do so).

Atomized society or just different structure?

One of the wide-spread errors in descriptions of Soviet (“totalitarian”) society was calling it “atomized”. That is an attractive but wrong concept. The term “atomized” implies that there was no structure between the state a person facing the totality of the Leviathan. The description is just not correct. There was in fact the whole plethora of organizations between the person and the state. The problem was in their total dependency on the state.

On the first view, that did not make a big difference. If Soviet trade union was just an organization dependent on the state (in fact “continuation” of state bodies), it was unable to defend its member from arbitrariness of authorities. However, the difference becomes visual in a situation of weakened state. When the state (on any reason) withdraws from the control (such a situation may resulted from revolution or political turmoil, or economic inabilities etc.) trade union becomes the base for self-organization (or, at least, the model for a radical alternative) of employees. The first example of Polish “Solidarity” may differ from Russian miners’ strike in 1990s, but they both essentially demonstrated the same process of filling the old (“Soviet”) forms with real substance. The same was true for many other organizations created in the Soviet Union (and even earlier – in Imperial Russia). They did not cease to exist, instead they played significant role in the shaping of contemporary Russian society.
One of the mistakes of the Western donors was their view on Russian society at the moment they came as atomized blank field with no real societal structures. They consequently tried to promote NGOs as the form (almost only form) of societal structuring, and failed. Even the use of a term “NGO” in Russian (with its translated variants “NPO” and “NKO”) instead of an old Russian “obschestvennye organizatsii” meant the refusal to let Soviet organizations into brave new world of the Civil Society.

Paying tribute to many efforts of the Western donors, we must agree that they did achieve some success. There are NGOs in contemporary Russia, more those in the spheres of community development and service delivery than in advocacy, while research and innovation is still more the function of universities and organizations affiliated with them.

The most important role the Western donors played in Russia was the providing of economic alternative to the total state dependency. Russian state traditionally knew the only pyramid of power and property where it was impossible to keep property if you were far from power institutes or to be powerful and stay poor. While state loosened political control over societal organizations, it still kept them dependent in economic terms. There was no property really independent from the state institutes. In such conditions providing grants and technical assistance created other reality that helped some organizations for the first time feel free.

When did that happen?

The 1990s

If we do not count brief revolutionary period of 1917, the State was weak in the unique decade of 1990s. When the authorities voluntarily or due to its weakness withdraw from the spheres of society, the civil structures mushroomed there. The latest period of such growth of civic institutions took place in the 1990s. The State was virtually very weak and let society develop as it could.

There were several groups of the population that began to self-organize into society, among them national minorities (mostly with political goals), sport groups and security providers (that Vadim Volkov called “violent entrepreneurs”), and handicapped persons and their relatives who faced problem of survival after state abandoned its obligations and some others. But some of the elements of the Russian society in 1990s were inherited from the earlier periods of history. It were those organizations that shaped the development of Russian civil society.

Among the structures that survived the collapse of the USSR, the most successful in the 1990s were Komsomol and affiliated youth organizations, Communist Party of the Russian Federation (that ceased to be nomenclature “party of power”), and trade unions.

Local KPRF organizations were active in local communities’ development, while the bulk of innovative research is conducted by universities (as well as by state-owned institutions).

Political organizations in Russia as part of civil society
An ideal type description of the phenomenon of Civil Society includes definitive limits between political sphere, economy and the society itself. However, it is hard to find such borders in Russia.

As I have already mentioned, among the most important problems in Russia there are ties between property and power. Authorities exercise direct and indirect control over property and property distribution (and recent Yukos affair was both the proof of the rule and the tool used by the state to reaffirm it). When there is no independent property there are no independent (and potent) organizations.

Even the small NGOs in Russia are dependent on the local authorities in many ways – receiving office space or other resources from them, participating in local programs, etc. Shall we exclude them from civil society on this ground?

Let us look at this logic in reverse order. To be potent, an organization must possess independent property, that maxim leads to the importance of the societal control over the state. That means that civil society in Russia cannot be isolated from politics.

Traditional approach to civil society draws the border line between state and society. The entity engaged in political activity could not be considered civil society. However, if we look again into history, we will see that it was the participation of (some parts of) society in politics that resulted in control of the civil society over the state and permitted state-independent organizations to exist. Russia today is on that level of development when it is impossible to understand civil society without its political constituents. I would say that such constituents include all societal organizations with the exclusion of state bureaucracy and state party (United Russia).

All other parties in Russia in 2000s are not real political actors. In the situation of absence of mechanisms of changing ruling elite (there was not a single instance in Russia’s history when ruling part of the elite ceded power to its opponents within the existing law) seemingly “political” activity of KPRF, Yabloko, SPS and other opposition parties has no link to the question of power distribution. However, that does not mean that that activity is meaningless. It makes a lot of sense viewed as a part of activity within the civil society.

Moreover, what shall we call “politics” in a society that lacks civil society? Is it a struggle for power without democratic procedures? Those groups that base their strategy on the democratic procedures (=rule of law) will lose, but they are shaping civil society itself (this is true, of course, only if their political opponents that come to power will not wipe them out).

The other reason to include Russian political parties into the model of civil society in the making is the understanding that the result of the process cannot be defined as civil society (or state) per se but a situation when the civil society controls the state.

Civil Society as a Left Project

The first and the most important institute in contemporary Russia that survived the collapse of the Old regime is Communist Party of the Russian Federation (KPRF). It consists of a network of local organizations, controls many local governments, and offers a clear career path for the youths. KPRF is the only really mass organization in Russia, and it does not quite fit to the current political system of “managed democracy”. It also does not look like any other contemporary Russian political party, neither right-wing, nor
left. “United Russia” is inherited the nomenclature features of the old KPSS (CPSU), while KPRF did not. Let us put alone the party leadership, State Duma members and governors-communists. We shall see a network of groups of active people; many of them are neither interested in real politics nor in ideology. If we add the variety of affiliated organizations such as Women councils (Zhe snovety), old trade-unions, or street committees in small cities, we found the picture of not-strictly-political society organization.

If we look at Communist Party organizations, the local level will be pretty different from any other political entity in contemporary Russia.

When we agree to include quasi-political sphere into our analysis of civil society, we see that the really wide structures that attract mass non-elitist groups of Russian society exist on the left flank of politics almost exclusively.

The largest network of organizations exists around KPRF. The most active youth groups are centered in NBP (National Bolshevik Party of Eduard Limonov) and AKM (Vanguard of Red Youth), both leftist organizations.

Among the new organizations that appeared in the 1990s as a result of society’s creativity in the situation of state’s withdrawal there were also NGOs (oriented toward western grants or organizationally and financially weak), some traditional groups such as Cossack revivalists, and groups offering security protection. I would exclude the latter ones from the Civil Society not because their criminal ties but because they participated in the exercise of power. “Violent entrepreneurs” were not Civil Society but quasi-State.

Unlike those folks, the parties’ structures (especially their local committees not represented in State Duma or regional legislatures) were more close to civil society, gauging on their goals, methods, and membership.

Why the leftists are so successful in organizing civil society in Russia?
There are at least three reasons:

First of all, the left values are communitarian ones and one can say that civil society is also based on the communitarian principles (or, one can amend me, was evolved from such communities). That is why today in Russia we see local activism almost totally fallen into leftist organizations. KPRF, AKM, NBP and other leftist youth organizations are the most visual part of Russian society today.

Secondly, left parties and movements during the period of reforms in the 1990s actively organized and participated in the protest movements, and built up their networks of organizations. It is possible to say that civil society in the last decade was the real project of the Russian Left. Right-wing politicians, who based their programs on the procedural democracy and markets, seemed not interested (or not aware) in the need for building civil society as another side of the task. They preferred to appeal to the state and state reformers (and filled government vacancies throughout 1990s) keeping alive an old saying: “Governments is the main European in Russia”.

Finally, the large portion of contemporary organizations in Russia was inherited from the Soviet times, and includes traditional left orientation (such as trade unions).

The main idea of recent Khodorkovskii letter from his prison was the prediction of a “left turn” that would occur in Russia. He just noticed the grass-roots left mobilization that may be considered also the appearance of civil society. Right politicians and reformers may be not happy about that, but civil society would probably never agree to a “shock therapy” or other radical reforms. It is more conservative institution than it is
the revolutionary one. Historically, it went on to revolution when the state becomes oppressive and/or tried to worsen the conditions of life. In recent Russian history miners’ strikes in the 1990s were the biggest sign of the appearance of civil society.

**Conclusion**

Russian civil society grows up from the Russian society (and not from “atomized” mass of persons). Just as American civil society grew up from self-organized protestant communities of 17th-18th Centuries and took over the state during its War for independence, Russian society now consists of conglomerate of structures inherited from the different stages of its development. Part of them is the result of grass-root self-organization, other part was created from above (by the state), and still another part was helped to create “from aside” (by the Western donors). How that conglomerate would evolve into society?

That is why, its goals, very probably, will differ from the goals of the Western civil societies. It is already clear that Russian state is sometimes more European than the structures of civil society (compare jury’s decision on Sutyagin and Ulman cases). Russian society may even be alien to the values of market economy and procedural democracy. However, this society is the only environment that may become the birthplace of Russian civil society. It is in fact already proto-civil society.

The major aim of Russian civil society is not an achievement of “independence” from the state, but turnover of relations that existed for centuries and establishing of a societal control over the state.

Russian reformers face a hard choice. The future road of Russia must be either modernization of the country using right recipes (the state remains the major tool of reform) or structural reform in the relations between society and state that will lead very probably to the left comeback and visual inhibition of country development. Counter intuitively, the second option may look more promising. However, in her history Russia kept choosing the first one.