State and Society in Russia Under Putin

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EXTREMELY ROUGH DRAFT: PLEASE DO NOT CITE WITHOUT PERMISSION
In November, 2001, Russian President Vladimir Putin told the Civic Forum, a large meeting of civil society activists sponsored by the Kremlin, that “there cannot be a strong democratic state in the context of a weak society.” (Cited in Weigle, 2002: 137) At that time the activists had reason to be optimistic about the future of Russian civil society. The Third Sector in Russia had been growing in strength since the early 1990s. Tens of thousands of active non-governmental organizations (NGOs) were pushing their concerns forward on the social agenda. In some regions, NGOs had begun working productively with the local authorities, advising them on matters of policy and helping them deliver needed social services. At the Civic Forum itself, national NGOs had been able to resist the Kremlin’s efforts to control the agenda, the format and the list of participants of the meeting to ensure independent voices could be heard. (For accounts on the Civic Forum, see Weigle, 2002; Nikitin and Buchanan, 2002)

Today, nearly four years later, President Putin continues to trumpet the virtues of a strong civil society, but many participants in Russia’s Third Sector, as well as most outside observers, are far less optimistic. (See especially Mendelson, 2002) Ever since Putin came to office, they argue, he has acted consistently to control and domesticate civil society: coopting many organizations in service to the state while strangling the more independent voices with restrictive regulations, harassment, and, at times, overt repression. Moreover, his efforts have been largely successful.

How do we reconcile Putin’s enthusiastic words about civil society and his subsequent actions? Are his pronouncements in favor of civil society simply empty rhetoric designed to deceive listeners as to his real intentions? Or does Putin define the notion of civil society somewhat differently than do the advocates of an independent Third Sector? Most importantly, why have the civil society organizations not been able to defend themselves more vigorously?

Answers to these questions depend in part on how one approaches the notion of civil society. The concept itself presupposes clear distinctions between state and society and between the public and private spheres that, in practice, are often hard to discern. Rather than looking at civil society per se, then, this paper instead looks at how these distinctions are constructed, negotiated, and maintained. In the case of Russia, I argue that Russian society has ceded the Third Sector to the state, because most people do not regard it as a site worthy of contestation. This apparent acquiescence will not lead to Putin’s success in controlling society, however. Without giving people an autonomous voice, they will choose to retreat further from the public sphere, forcing Putin to rely increasingly on state bureaucracy to get things done and hindering his aspirations for the modernization of Russia.

DEFINITION OF CIVIL SOCIETY

The definitions of civil society in the academic literature vary widely. Most scholars in the United States conceive civil society as that realm of the public sphere between the household and the state, consisting of diverse voluntary associations such as advocacy groups, charitable groups, religious associations, quilting societies and bowling clubs, where individual citizens pursue parochial interests (See, for example, Ottaway and Chung, 1999). Such associations, in this view, act as a buttress for
democracy. They mediate between the state and individual, transmitting social demands to the state even as they mobilize society behind state policies. They can also act as a buffer, providing networks of support that insulate individuals from the impersonal forces of the state or market. Third, they can act as a watchdog, monitoring and pressuring governmental agencies to ensure they conform to the people’s will. Fourth, they can act as a teacher, socializing citizens into accepting social norms and instilling within them the mutual trust necessary to solve common problems.

This concept of civil society, though highly influential, has also been heavily, and justifiably, criticized. First, the concept has become a victim of its own success, weighed down by all the normative baggage people have heaped upon it over the years. Because everyone sees civil society as a positive thing, everyone wants to claim it as their own. Scholars want to discover to what extent civil society exists and with what consequences; foreign assistance agencies claim to build civil society; and political leaders and activists like to appropriate civil society for their own agendas (Seligman, 1992: 201-206).

A second problem is that this definition seeks to universalize an image of civil society rooted in particular historical circumstances. Civil society, by its very nature, is the product of the particular historical experience of each country, and, inevitably, it looks different across cultural and state boundaries. The definition described in the last paragraph, for example, is most closely associated with the writings of Alexis de Tocqueville in his analysis of US society in the early nineteenth century, and it is no accident that this definition should be particularly popular among American analysts and practitioners. Other theorists of civil society, such as Hegel, Gramsci and Locke, have defined civil society quite differently, in each case reflects their own experience and purposes (Kharkhordin, 1998, discusses how classic theories of civil society relied upon differing visions of religious communities). All of these approaches to civil society originate from societies in Western Europe and North America, leading many scholars of other societies to wonder if the concept is useful to them at all. (See especially the essays in Hann and Dunn, 1996).

Indeed, the very notion of civil society presupposes two fundamental distinctions—between the state and society, and between the public and private—that are themselves social constructs embedded in local histories and institutions. As Timothy Mitchell (1991: 78) observes, the distinction between state and society is not the distinction “between two distinct entities,” but rather as a line drawn internally within the network of institutional mechanisms through which a social and political order is maintained.” The more interesting questions concerns where and how the line is drawn and what are the consequences for social order. What do we make, for example, of non-profit organizations contracted by the government to help unemployed workers find jobs? Or private security firms paid by the government to protect the US officials in Iraq?

The second distinction, between the public and private spheres, is equally murky and equally crucial. What aspects of our lives are considered public and legitimately subject to regulation by the state? What aspects of our lives are considered private and natural, therefore outside the legitimate grasp of political authorities? The answers to these questions are not static. They shift continuously, usually quite slowly but sometimes at unsettling speed, as the result of a continuing dialog between the claims of public responsibility and the legitimate private interests of individual (See particularly Gal and Kligman, 2000:37-62).
These critiques, taken together, suggest that any effort to find a single definition of civil society that would apply to many different societies is futile, and that the effort to use the lens of DeTocqueville’s *Democracy in America*, to analyze other societies can only lead to erroneous conclusions and misguided policy recommendations. Accordingly, this paper does not look to identify or measure something called civil society in Russia, but instead examines the dialog between and *within* different social actors regarding the legitimate reach and demands of the state, on the one hand, and the sphere of private action on the other.

**Governmentality**

My analysis relies heavily on insights drawn from Foucault’s concept of governmentality. Government, in Foucault’s sense, is not about policy; it is about the social mechanisms, coordinated but not necessarily created by the state, to induce the population to govern themselves. The aim of government is to create subjects, where “subject” is defined both in the sense of being “subject to someone else by control and dependence, and tied to his own identity by conscience or self-knowledge” (Foucault, 1994b: 331). In other words, government seeks to arrange things in order “to develop those elements constitutive of individuals’ lives in such a way that their development also fosters the strength of the state.” (Foucault, 1994a: 322).

Foucault developed the notion of governmentality to understand how liberal regimes managed to govern “at arm’s length,” that is, without the direct intervention of the state. Liberal regimes posit the existence of a civil society, autonomous from the state, in which natural laws and self-regulating mechanisms work to maintain social order. Thus, whereas Thomas Hobbes famously argued for a leviathan to protect the population from a natural state of affairs characterized by war of all against all, the liberal theorist John Locke described the state of nature in benign terms, where individuals would abide by certain norms and principles without the state’s heavy hand. The role of the state in such a regime is to “ensure the play of natural and necessary modes of regulation, to make regulations which permit natural regulation to operate.” (Foucault, Lecture, Collège de France, 5 April, 1978; cited in Gordon, 1991, 17). The difficulty, of course, is that the universal laws posited by liberalism can only work if one presupposes the existence of subjects who are willing to accept them. Such self-government is not innate. Good citizens are not born; they are constructed.

According to Foucault, people become “citizen-subjects” through their participation in (and submission to) multiple, overlapping social disciplines. Disciplines are institutionalized discourses and practices that “standardize populations within certain defined parameters, induce individuals to regulate their behavior within these defined parameters and discipline conduct that might deviate from these parameters with a combination of surveillance, social and legal sanctions.” (Lipschutz, 2005: 237) Power is central to how disciplines work, but power in this sense should not be seen as a static commodity belonging to particular institutions or individuals. Rather, it circulates through the participants of the regime, and is ‘employed and exercised’ in the everyday statements and practices they use to observe, evaluate and discipline each other. (Foucault, 1980: 98). Disciplinary power, according to Foucault, does not simply constrain behavior; it “operates on the field of possibilities in which the behavior of active subjects is able to inscribe itself…it incites, it induces, it seduces, it makes easier or more difficult; it releases or contrives, makes more probable or less; in the extreme, it
constrains or forbids absolutely, but it is always a way of acting upon one or more acting subjects by virtue of their acting or being capable of action.” (Foucault, 1994c: 341) As Timothy Mitchell writes: “Discipline…works not from the outside but from within, not at the level of an entire society but at the level of detail, and not by constraining individuals and their actions but by producing them. “ (Mitchell, 1999: 86.)

The work of government, therefore, cannot be localized within the institutions of the state; everyone is both governed and governor. This is not to say state institutions are unimportant: on the contrary, they play a key role in coordinating disciplines to meet a particular end.

“In contemporary societies, the state is not simply one of the forms of specific situations of the exercise of power—even if it is the most important—but that, in a certain way, all other forms of power relation must refer to it. But this is not because they are derived from it; rather, it is because power relations have come more and more under state control (although this state control has not taken the same form in pedagogical, judicial, economic or family systems). Using here the restricted meaning of the word ‘government,” one could say that power relations have been progressively governmentalized, that is to say, elaborated, rationalized and centralized in the form of, or under the auspices of, state institutions.” (Foucault, 1994c: 345)

Thus, for example, voluntary associations like religious congregations may exist prior to the state, but in a highly governmentalized society, state regulations have a huge impact on where a congregation might meet, where its members can proselytize, what sort of activities it can engage in and what sort of resources it has access to.

Because disciplines do not constrain but induce, because they act upon subjects so that they choose to govern themselves, the concept assumes a measure of individual agency. So, even as subjects observe and evaluate themselves and others according to the discourse and practices of social discipline, they can also find room to carve out a niche for their own personhood. This is particularly true of individuals who participate in multiple social fields simultaneously. While some of the disciplines within such fields will overlap and reinforce each other, some may touch each other only tangentially, or even collide. In these cases individuals can negotiate the interstices of different fields to increase their room for maneuver. (Bennett, 2003: 61) Of course, such departures from accepted boundaries will provoke efforts to capture such practices—by cooption, adaptation or even repression—back into the regime’s coordinative matrix and reorient them to recognize the authority of the state. The exercise of power, therefore, between the impulses toward state order, on the one hand, and individual freedom, on the other, might be described as a continuing dialog or even an “agonism”, a relation that “is at the same time mutual incitement and struggle; less of a face-to-face confrontation that paralyzes both sides than a permanent provocation.” (Foucault, 1994b: 342)

It is precisely here, in the process of mutual incitement and struggle, that the distinctions between state and society, public and private are so crucial, particularly in liberal regimes. In liberal regimes, it is the autonomous, self-regulating sphere of civil society that is an essential site of socialization, where disciplines work upon and form liberal subjects. Social norms and values are inculcated into the values and habits of individual citizens from a multitude of sources: the family, the church, the school,
media and other organizations. Precisely because such socialization comes from many, overlapping sources associated with society rather than the state, they are not conceived as the conscious invention of human beings that are both fallible and subject to change. Rather, they are the seen as the “way things are,” the product of impersonal, natural forces, outside politics, and impervious to human manipulation.

At the same time, “civil society” provides a sphere in which the contradictions within society, the “agonisms” between social disciplines and the subject can be negotiated without directly implicating the state. What actions and behaviors are subject to public scrutiny and evaluation? What areas of practice invite the approval or disapproval of neighbors and passers-by, and what areas of practice are simply none of their damned business? Even though the state plays an active role in shaping this negotiation, the construction of civil society makes the “state” appear to be an innocent bystander.

In short, these distinctions between public and private, state and society are central constituent elements of the regime. They are rehearsed in the practices of daily life, institutionalized over years of accumulated struggle and provocation. Of course, these boundaries are also contested. The call of the feminists that the “personal is political”, for example, is an effort to bring relations within the household into the public sphere so that the relations of power in existing gender roles could be made transparent and an object of political struggle. The Putin administration, with its efforts to strengthen the vertical power, seeks to expand the legitimate role of the state and place limits on an autonomous public sphere. The next section investigates where Putin places the boundary between state and society.

Putin and Gosudarstvennost

Has Putin’s administration abandoned liberalism and the effort to “govern at a distance” in favor of more direct state control? On several occasions he has explicitly recognized the costs involved in asking the state to administer all aspects of society. At a press conference in December, 2004, for example, he stated that “one thing we absolutely must do if we are to achieve any real success in …[administrative reform] is…to gradually withdraw the state from areas of the economy where its presence is not justified.”(Vladimir Putin, Press Conference of Vladimir Putin, December 23, 2004, http://www.kremlin.ru/eng/speeches/2004/12/23/1806_type82915_81700.shtml) He also has acknowledged that it would be unproductive, perhaps impossible to construct such a strong society “from above.”(Putin, Speech at the Civic Forum, November, 2001; cited in Weigle, 2002:136)

So how do we reconcile Putin’s support for civil society with his continuing drift towards authoritarianism? One could dismiss his public rhetoric as a mere smokescreen to hide his less democratic intentions, but the consistency of his statements suggest something more is at work here, a philosophy of governance with its own distinctive notions about the boundaries between state and society, the public and the private. For a lack of a better term, I will describe this philosophy as “gosudarstvennost” (Other discussions of this term, which for lack of better choices might be translated into English as statism, can be found in Squier, 2002). The concept of gosudarstvennost has deep roots in Russian history(An intellectual history of Russian concepts of the state can be founding Kharkhordin, 2001). Unlike the liberal state, gosudarstvenost does not
consider the state to be a regulatory body that ensures the self-regulating mechanisms within society will run smoothly. Rather, it sees the state as an entity separate and autonomous from society, an embodiment of the collective will of the nation. The state should stand aloof from the bickering of partisan politics, and direct society (from above) in the interests of the whole. The interests of the state, then, are both separate from and must take precedence over popular concerns. The state, rather than the population, is the locus of Russian sovereignty.

Under *gosudarstvennost*, the public sphere is far more constricted than it is under liberalism, circumscribed by the interests of the state. Individuals are free to pursue private interests so long as they are not seen to impinge upon the public sphere. Insofar as an individual’s activities do impinge on the regulation of public life, the interests of the individual should be in harmony with the interests of the collective, and hence compatible with the overall mission of the state as the embodiment of the collective will. For example, Putin generally has tolerated the oligarch’s economic activities, so long as they do not venture into activities he believes have a more political orientation; that is, activities that seek to pressure the state into directions that do not correspond with his own vision. The oligarchs are allowed, even encouraged, to set up private foundations, make charitable donations, sponsor cultural events or support scholarships and other educational activities. Less welcome are private foundations, such as those founded by Berezovsky and Khodorkovsky, that fund advocacy organizations that explicitly seek to influence state policy.

In short, *gosudarstvennost* posits a relation between the individual and society much different than that found in liberalism. Liberalism argues that, through the self-regulating mechanisms of the market and civil society, the individual can best contribute to the public good by pursuing her private interests (within the constraint of the law). In contrast, Putin’s notion of *gosudarstvennost* argues that the individual can fully realize his humanity only in service to the common good. As Putin’s spin doctor Gleb Pavlovsky has argued, “free citizens in close union with the government will be able to establish an order in which personal initiatives are not degraded and each individual realizes his own potential.” (cited in Nikitin and Buchanan, 2002:148).

Harley Balzer, in an article on “managed pluralism,” describes how Putin’s conception of the boundary between the public and private realm works itself out in the administration’s policies. Balzer recognizes the need to encourage popular initiative if Russia is ever going to restore its status as a great power in an increasingly global economy. But even as Putin encourages individual initiative, he also seeks to orchestrate and constrain this initiative within narrow boundaries consistent with this overarching mission of the state. The state does not “attempt to dictate a single political, religious or cultural ‘norm’ in complex societies.” But it does seek “to restrict the palette to shades and hues compatible with familiar landscapes.” (Balzer, 2003: 191) The great problem is that the boundaries between what is and is not acceptable are not institutionalized. The state defines and enforces them arbitrarily and selectively rather than clearly and consistently. This helps the Putin administration in its effort to control: whereas clear and consistent boundaries provoke efforts to test the limits, arbitrary boundaries increase anxiety and deters such tests.

Putin’s approach to civil society clearly follows this model of “managed pluralism.” As noted above, Putin hopes to harness individual initiative to perform key
functions in strengthening the state. First, he hopes civic organizations can perform functions that the state cannot perform, or cannot perform as well, particularly in the delivery of social services. They can also act as a conduit that can communicate public demands to government authorities, mobilize support for government policy and monitor state officials to minimize corruption and improve implementation. (Georgy Satarov, “Russia’s Government Launches Dialogue on Civil Society Issues,” Russia Journal 4: 24 (22-28 June 2001), www.russiajournal.com/printer/weekly4798.html, cited in Weigel, 2002: 133). In other words, active civic organizations contribute to a healthy society insofar as their activities are directed towards strengthening the state that oversees that society. Those organizations that pursue a course that does not line up with the general policy directions of the state are portrayed as alien and even harmful to the interests of society, and therefore targets for discipline. For example, NGOs working to help educate enforcement agencies on domestic violence or the trafficking of women, to preserve existing natural areas or to monitor conditions in Russian prisons have relatively few problems working with the authorities; those that criticize the construction of oil pipelines or human rights violations in Chechnya, on the other hand, have a more difficult time.

The clearest statement of Putin’s approach to civil society can be found in his state of the nation address on 26 May, 2004. (A transcript of this speech can be found at Johnson’s Russia List, http://www.cdi.org/russia/johnson/2004-state-nation.cfm) In this speech, as on other occasions, Putin declared that it was “necessary gradually to transfer to the non-state sector the functions which the state should not carry out or is incapable of carrying out efficiently.” But even as he praised the “thousands of citizens’ associations and unions working constructively in our country,” he also warned that “far from all of them are geared towards defending people’s real interests. For some of these organizations, the priority is rather different—obtaining funding from influential foreign or domestic foundations. For others it is servicing dubious groups and commercial interests.” With these words, Putin again argued that service to society meant strengthening the state, and he equated those organizations that challenged the state as outside the body politic, serving foreign or criminal interests against the collective will. Putin did not issue a direct threat against these organizations, and he again failed to demarcate the boundaries between these two types of organizations very clearly. What he did do, according to Arseni Roginsky, was “signal to bureaucrats that they should divide organizations into good and bad, help the ones they consider good and build barriers for the ones they consider to be bad.” (Glasser, 2004)

Although the Russian authorities generally have avoided using overt repression to silence advocacy organizations, they have used a variety of levers to encourage Third Sector organizations to stay within acceptable limits and to make life difficult for those that do not. Most importantly, they have tried to control the funding for advocacy organizations. Putin has made it clear over and over again that he subscribes to the adage that “who pays the piper orders the tune.”(See, for example, the account of Putin’s discussion in July, 2005, with members of the Presidential Council for the Assistance of Development of Civil Society Institutions; in Romanova, 2005). He has always expressed concerns about advocacy organizations who receive foreign funds, and particularly so after the “colored” revolutions in Georgia and Ukraine. Thus, he has sought on several occasions, usually but not always successfully, to alter the tax laws in a
way that would make it less costly for donors to support favored non-profit organizations than to contribute advocacy organizations (See Squier, 2002: 173-174) The most notorious example of these efforts occurred in the summer of 2004, when the Duma passed in its first reading a bill that would have required foreign donors to register their grants with a Presidential commission set up for that purpose. Fortunately, that law did not pass. (Antonov 2005) With regard to Russian donors, the administration has sought to direct charitable giving to approved projects as much as possible. The arrests of both Berezovsky and Khodorkovsky, in particular, sent a message dissuading wealthy Russians from funding independent advocacy organizations. Finally, Putin has indicated he might increase state funding for NGO projects, presumably to entice them to stay within accepted boundaries.

In addition to controlling the revenue stream of civic organizations, the Putin administration has also sponsored corporatist arrangements that would integrate the activities of civic organizations more closely with state institutions and align their interests with those of the state. Such arrangements have been a favorite mechanism for the Putin administration. During Putin’s first term in office, the administration introduced a new labor code that would elevate the Federation of Independent Trade Unions to be the official representative of the country’s trade unions, weakening the bargaining position of more independent alternatives. (Squier, 2002: 175-6; Balzer, 2003: 204-207) Less successfully, allies of the Kremlin proposed in June, 2001, a Media Union that would offer journalists greater access to high-ranking officials in return for more “constructive” coverage of government policies; few journalists accepted the offer (Balzer, 2003: 204-205). That same month, Putin met with a few representatives of the Third Sector to organize a similar arrangement for the Russian NGOs. This “Civic Forum” was supposed to facilitate a “permanent, inspired and mutually beneficial dialogue with the Administration” (Nikitin and Buchanan, 2002: 148). At first, the Kremlin hoped to limit the participants and the agenda to its own liking. This effort was resisted strongly by a group called the “People’s Assembly,” an umbrella group of strong, independent organizations such as Memorial, the Moscow-Helsinki Group and the Socio-Ecological Union. In the end, these organizations were able to win significant concessions regarding both the groups who could participate and the agenda of the meeting. (For accounts on the Civic Forum, see Weigle, 2002; Nikitin and Buchanan, 2002) Many of the activists left the Forum hoping that it would eventually lead to a more productive dialog with the state.

Unfortunately, things didn’t work out that way. Most recently, the Putin administration’s most recent effort to channel Russia’s Third Sector into service to the state has been the proposal for a Public Chamber (obshchestvennyi palata), a corporatist arrangement that would bring civil society organizations into partnership with the state to help provide social services. This proposal draws from the experience of similar chambers created in several of Russia’s cities and regions in the 1990s, which allowed representatives of civil society organizations to consult with local authorities on the formation and implementation of policy, usually socially policy. (Weigle, 2002) In his state of the nation speech in May, 2004, Putin explicitly praised such “public chambers” as a model for the government at the national level: “It also makes sense to make use of the experience of the work of public chambers, gathered in a number of Russia’s regions. Such standing non-state organizations can ensure independent scrutiny
of the most important regulatory instruments which directly affect the interests of the country’s citizens.” Since then, similar chambers have been created in Ryazan, Orlov, Tver and Novosibirsk, among others. (Petrov, 2005)

The current proposal for a Public Chamber clearly would place independent organizations in a subordinate position. The ostensible functions of this chamber is to articulate to the authorities the “needs and interests” of private citizens and public organizations, to provide public expertise of laws and regulations, and to execute “public control” over executive powers at the federal, regional and local levels. According to Putin, however, the Public Chamber should shy away from political questions., Moreover, the chamber will have only an advisory role; its recommendations will not have the force of law. Finally, the Presidential administration will have a decisive voice determining who will sit in the chamber. The President chooses the first 42 of 126 members, who will be announced in early October. So far, as far as we know, he has picked only loyalists to serve on the chamber. These representatives will then select an additional 42 members from public organizations at national level and the combined membership of 84 would then select the last 42 members from activists at the regional level. Eventually, some independent voices will make their way into the Chamber, but most will be unwilling to risk the prestige and security that membership in the chamber will give them by stepping over the boundaries of acceptability. As a result, the independent voices likely will be marginalized. Indeed, many of the most outspoken advocates for human rights, such as Lyudmila Alexeeva at Moscow Helsinki Watch, have said they would not participate in the Public Chamber even if asked to do so.

In addition to seeking to coordinate already existing groups within corporatist arrangements, the Kremlin has also sponsored its own organizations, particularly after the Orange Revolution in Ukraine, to be mobilized as a counterweight to possible public unrest. The first such organizations was the youth movement, Walking Together. (Squier, 2002.: 176-179; Balzer, 2003: 208) When that movement proved to lack energy and support, the Kremlin then sponsored the more nationalist youth movement, Nashi (Our Own) . Last summer, moreover, the Kremlin announced its intentions to create its own human rights organization, named Renaissance.

Finally, on selective occasions the Kremlin has resorted to overt repression to silence voices at odds with the state’s message. The convictions of Igor Sutyagin and Grigorii Pasko are the most notable cases, but there have been many cases of harassment, particularly in the provinces where local officials have used the permissiveness of the center to bear down on regional organizations. (U.S. Department of State, 2004 Country Report on Human Rights, Accessed: http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2004/41704.htm, August 8, 2005)

Russian Society: A Willing Partner?

Why have Russian advocacy groups not been able to resist Putin’s encroachments on the public sphere? Why have they not been able to negotiate with the Kremlin with regard to the public chamber as did with regard to the Civic Forum in 2001? One reason has been the change in the international situation. Before September 11, 2001, the Putin administration faced continuing pressure from the West to consult “civil society” in governance as evidence of democratization. After September 11, 2001, the Bush administration regarded the Putin administration as a valuable ally in the so-called war against terror, blunting such international pressure on Russia. The Kremlin also has more
financial leverage over advocacy groups than it did four years ago. The rising price of oil, improved tax revenue, and the corresponding improvement in Russia’s fiscal health have made the Russian government less vulnerable to the demands of foreign creditors than it had in the past, even as some of the largest foreign donors, such as Soros’ Open Society Institute or USAID, have either closed shop in Russia or significantly reduced assistance to Russian NGOs. Since there are few domestic alternatives to foreign assistance, particularly after the prosecutions of Berezovsky and Khordorkovsky, NGOs increasingly had to rely on state to maintain their organizational structures.

Perhaps the fundamental reason for Putin’s ability to constrain the Russian Third Sector, however, has been Russian society’s willingness to accept it. In saying this, I do not mean to imply that society agrees with Putin’s notion of gosudarstvennost. As I argue above, the boundary between the public and the private is a point of negotiation between and within social actors. I suggest, therefore, that Russian “society” still struggles to maintain a realm of autonomy from the state, but they do not see the collection of NGOs known as the Third Sector as a site where it is worth engaging this struggle. Many Russians remain distrustful of organized NGOs and are ready to cede the state control over those organizations even as they seek to carve out more autonomy in other arenas. Thus, the populations tacit acceptance of Putin’s efforts should not be interpreted as agreement with his ideas. Indeed, Putin’s misinterpretation of such acceptance may lead to his ultimate failure.

In order to understand Russian conceptions of public and private, it is important to consider the Soviet legacy. The Soviet revolutionary project to transform traditional Russian society and create a New Socialist Man did not acknowledge the possibility of a private sphere. All facets of human personality and behavior had political significance and were open to scrutiny. But even during the Stalin period, many individuals learned to dissimulate, that is to conduct themselves correctly in public while concealing the thoughts and behaviors that would not stand up to official scrutiny from all but a chosen few (Kharkhordin, 1999: 270-278). As Oleg Kharkhordin argues, this act of dissimulation made possible a small private sphere outside the reach of official authority, no matter how narrow and confined that sphere might be. Indeed, it was through the act of dissimulation that one came to define one’s individuality with respect to the regime and the society at large. This circumstance, however, created a problem for the regime. Rather than creating conditions in which the development of the subject-citizen also strengthens the state, the regime fostered the development of bifurcated subjects who defined their “authentic” selves through the act of evading the demands and expectations of the public sphere. In short, the regime had successfully created subjects who were “subject to someone else by control and dependence,” but not subjects “tied to [their] own identity by conscience or self-knowledge” (Foucault, 1994b: 331)

The effort to ‘governmentalize’ this bifurcated identity, to somehow capture or reconcile the private and public selves in service to the regime, colored Soviet politics throughout the post-Stalinist era. The introduction of a more predictable socialist legality after Stalin’s death expanded greatly the possibilities of dissimulation. This new circumstance gave rise to a debate within the Soviet media: while some voices persisted in demanding the erasure of the self in the name of constructing communism, others implicitly recognized that Soviet citizens might entertain individual aspirations, feelings and interests that existed separately from, if still subordinate to, the revolutionary project.
In the end, Khrushchev redefined that project in a way that not only acknowledged (implicitly) the legitimacy of private interests but sought to harness this interest to a campaign of economic development: the measure of socialism, he declared, was its ability to provide its population with a better standard of living than capitalism could.

Even as the Soviet regime acknowledged the possibility of individuality, it also extended and deepened the mechanisms of social control to discipline that individuality to the regime’s purposes. Under the guise of enhancing socialist self-government, the regime introduced a range of collective institutions, such as the people’s courts or people’s patrols, that encouraged the citizenry, but particularly the party aktiv, to monitor and discipline each other. As the result of such measures, Kharkhordin (1999: 303) argues, “the disciplinary grid became faultless and ubiquitous: any degree of freedom in private was to be paid for by an inescapable participation in the mutual enforcement of unfreedom and humiliation in public.”

The regime’s effort to extend its disciplines further into the lives of the citizens, though, provoked citizens to create new mechanisms to buffer themselves from state intrusion. In this case, people often found refuge within informal networks embedded within the collectives sponsored by the state, or alternatively created new collectives without the blessing of the Party-state (Kharkhordin, 1999: 303-322). One notable group of this sort was the družhiny po okhrane priroda, an association of students from the biological faculties in Moscow and elsewhere, who, taking up the example of the regime’s people’s patrols, would undertake themselves to enforce poaching and other laws designed to protect the country’s nature reserves (Weiner, 1999).

After Khrushchev’s ouster, the Soviet regime became less and less interested in social transformation, and the ideological practices sustaining the regime became more and more ritualized. Such rituals enabled a further expansion of the private realm, creating a convenient screen upon which individuals could feign compliance while, behind the screen, they would cultivate as much as possible their lives in the “private” sphere. (An excellent analysis of this phenomenon can be found in Vaclav Havel’s, “Power of the Powerless, 1985: 35). This sharpened the perceived dichotomy between the “authentic” self and the “public” self, between “us,” the simple people, and “them.” (Gal and Kligman, 2000)

The Brezhnev regime not only tolerated this bifurcation of identity, but came to depend upon it as a constituent element of its governing strategy. For most people, the regime provided many of the basic necessities, such as food, shelter, and vodka, to give them the time to engage in long discussions at the kitchen table, sporting or cultural activities, perhaps a little business in the second economy or a serious drinking binge. But even many in the nomenklatura had an interest in promoting ritualized compliance in public while pursuing parochial interests in private, with little fear of retribution. Meanwhile, the regime relied on the informal personal networks that thrived under these conditions to grease the wheels of an overly bureaucratized planned economy, to act as an emotional and material buffer between the individual and the impersonal machinery of the party-state, and, finally, to monitor the behavior of other members in the networks to ensure they did not bring the unwanted attention of the regime (Kharkhordin, 1999: 322-328).
Though the mature socialist state had therefore accommodated the bifurcation of identity into its governing structure, it did not do so in a way that was efficient or, ultimately, very sustainable. Although the public obeisance to party rituals ensured a minimal amount of coordination to ensure the regime could function, it became increasingly unable to call upon, or even to allow, individual initiative and imagination to contribute to the public good. More importantly, the perceived dichotomy of “public” and “private”, “us” and “them” that so characterized post-Stalinist society under Brezhnev often obscured the fact that “us” and “them” were often the very same people in different contexts (Gal and Kligman, 2000). As the private self became increasingly identified as “authentic”, it began to encroach even further into the public realm, enabling individuals routinely to appropriate public resources to pursue private ends. Again, the regime failed to “develop those elements constitutive of individuals’ lives in such a way that their development also fosters the strength of the state” (Foucault, 1994b: 322). Quite the contrary, it had created a conception of individuality that could be developed only by weakening the state.

The introduction of perestroika sought to reverse this decline by once again seeking to harness the private realm for public purposes. Going much further than Khrushchev before him, Gorbachev no longer claimed that the transformational goals of the party necessarily superceded the private interests of the individual. The Communist Party would no longer direct people to demonstrate their loyalty to the cause; it had to persuade them. By this time, however, the bifurcation of identity between the authentic, private self and the public rituals had grown too deep. Rather than reconciling the public and the private, many people saw the glasnost and perestroika as an opportunity simply to throw off the constraints of public rituals. Bureacrats and others increasingly used their public positions for parochial purposes, and so the state disintegrated into innumerable satraps of officeholders. One thing that might have restored some coherence to state administration was the movement for democracy. Beyond the common hatred for the public rituals, however, the movement had relatively little to unite them. Given that the movement was arising from a fragmented society, it is no surprise that the movement itself was characterized by numerous very small organizations who often found it difficult to work together (Fish, 1995). Thus, the movement to depose the communist party resembled in many respects the society that the party created.

For reasons that I won’t go into here, the activism of the perestroika period quickly dissipated once the Soviet regime finally fell. It is more important, for the purposes of this paper, to examine how the boundary between public and private was renegotiated during the early 1990s, and how NGOs and advocacy groups fit into this picture. In crucial respects, one again saw the tendency of political elites to blur the line between public and private, such that public resources were again available for parochial purposes. In the Soviet period, however, such access to public resources remained contingent upon the public display of ideological rectitude. This performance, no matter how sincere or insincere, helped coordinate regime’s actions, limited such habits of personal gratification and hid them from public view. In the early Russian period, by contrast, there was no common language to coordinate state institutions, except perhaps the neoliberal rhetoric of self-interest, so that the informal networks were able to act in their perceived self-interest without constraint (The benefits of vertical constraints on informal collectives is discussed in Kharkhordin, 1999: 322-328).
of the state appropriated public resources with abandon, while private wealth, far from being hidden out of view, was flaunted in public as a symbol of status and power.

For most Russians who had no access to such resources, the reform brought great insecurity. The elimination of subsidies and the failure of the social safety net meant one could no longer hide securely in his or her own private lives; one could no longer engage in long conversations over the kitchen table or pursue hobbies or interests; one had to expend most of one’s time and energy simply seeking to survive. The public realm offered no solace. The incoherence and corruption of the state apparatus meant civic activism to represent people’s interests to the state would have little practical effect on people’s lives, even if laws were changed. The public sphere again became a realm of hypocrisy, powerlessness, and criminality. In these circumstances, many people again retreated to their own private worlds, insulating themselves from the economic maelstrom by cultivating their private plots and relying on personal networks, even though these niches were far smaller and less secure than before.

This combination of personal insecurity and distrust in the public sphere made Putin’s offer of exchanging stability for a more constricted public sphere more acceptable. Indeed, by pursuing a policy of pragmatic “gosudarstvennost’” devoid of any detectable political ideology, Putin’s offer was very attractive indeed. By promising to run the state efficiently, Putin seemed to offer a life that would be more orderly, and more predictable. By abjuring any specific political program, he tacitly assured the citizenry that the public sphere would no longer be saturated with hypocrisy and lies, that the state would have no reason to intrude upon their private lives for political purposes. In short many Russians believed Putin offered them a chance to live in peace and possibly to prosper, without being bothered by the state.

Of course, this was not Putin’s vision of Russian society and its obligations to the state. Though he recognized a realm for private endeavor, he did not call for Russian citizens to beat a full retreat from the public realm. Instead, as we have seen, he hoped popular initiative to act in favor of the state’s agenda of modernization. This did not occur. Not surprisingly, Gleb Pavlovsky, bemoaned Russians’ disengagement from the public sphere, particularly after Putin’s reelection in March, 2004: "there is no real activity by society," he complained.(Gleb Pavlovsky interview on Ekho Moskvy, BBC Monitoring, January 6, 2005, reprinted in Johnson’s Russia List, #9008, January 7, 2005.)

The Irrelevance of NGOs.

How do Russian advocacy organizations fit into this picture of state-society relations in Russia? During the 1990s, foreign assistance agencies devoted substantial resources to fund non-governmental organizations in Russia in order to promote a civil society. This assistance, I have argued elsewhere, was important in preserving a small but somewhat skewed public realm, a network of activists and professionals not directly dependent on resources from the state. Preserving such networks is particularly crucial today when the state is seeking to reduce even further the space for autonomous political action.

Over the longer term, however, the presence of such advocacy organizations have had no significant impact on the broader issue of state-society relations in Russia. This irrelevance stems only partly from their isolation from the rest of society, an isolation that unwittingly has been fostered precisely by the foreign agencies seeking to assist.
them (Mendelson and Glenn, 2002). More importantly, and somewhat paradoxically, they are irrelevant precisely because they are themselves embedded in Russian society and reproduce many of the characteristics of that society described above.

During the 1990s the number of social organizations in Russia grew at an extraordinary rate, but the most visible and effective of these organizations, with a few exceptions, depended heavily on foreign financial assistance to survive. Such assistance to Russian organizations was part of a larger, global effort, to strengthen civil society throughout the developing and post-communist worlds (The argument below is developed more fully in Richter, 2005) This global civil society regime, in accordance with neoliberal principles, aimed to complement and substitute for the state in providing social services, to monitor state activities to ensure greater accountability, and to create a constituency for further economic reform. As the literature on governmentality would suggest, the civil society regime sought to empower a particular kind of global citizen who would be induced to act in ways that would support the neoliberal regime worldwide.

Thus, the Russian organizations that received significant funding from abroad found themselves enmeshed in the disciplines of the global civil society regime, disciplines that worked to mold these organizations to resemble models of advocacy organizations found in the West. This model required organizational structures consistent with formal rational principles, complete with a charter, a mission statement, an office, a director, and often an accountant and an expert in computer technology. (Henderson, 2003; Mawsdley et al., 2002) Organizations receiving outside funding were expected to have a business plan, familiarize themselves with financial accounting procedures, and submit their activities to quantitative, cost-benefit analyses. In short, in many respects the organizations were encouraged to mimic the practices of corporate enterprises. (Uphoff 1996; Mawsdley et al., 2002: 15, 69, 75, 123)

The civil society regime also affected the kind of activities these organizations would engage in. Donors clearly had an impact on the priorities of Russian advocacy organizations, but, even more importantly, they also shaped how advocacy organizations went about pursuing such priorities. Most foreign donors insisted that their grantees remain non-partisan. They funded projects to lobby, research and disseminate information on particular issues as well as to improve links within the activist community through internet connections, newsletters, seminars and conferences. In most, though certainly not all, cases, these projects conceptualized as discrete tasks with a particular timetable and measurable results.

Finally, the civil society regime both presupposed and encouraged grant recipients to take on the identity of civil society professionals (Richter, 2002). Access to new ideas and new contacts transformed activists’ interpretation of their past and their present, as well as their future. Local activists often gained new skills through their transnational contacts, including skills in organizational management, public relations, and lobbying, or even such mundane skills as operating a computer. Armed with such skills, local organizers attained the status of director, expert, consultant, legal adviser or service provider rather than political activist or organizer. In some cases, transnational connections allow local organizers to regard their work not simply as an avocation, but as a career, and defined their goals in terms of their own development and the development
of their organization at least as much as they considered the welfare of their constituents (Lang, 1997).

Despite such efforts to create a cadre of professional activists molded according to Western models, local customs, concerns and practices do have a way of reasserting themselves (Hemment 2000; Ebrahim 2003). First, it is important to note that the people most likely to participate in the civil society regime came from two segments of the Russian elites: 1) the creative intelligentsia, and principally academics, who were able to gain access to regime resources due to their familiarity with Western languages or customs, and their ability to adapt to demands of foreign assistance agencies; 2) people, particularly in the provinces, who had been active in social organizations under the previous regime and gained access to regime resources through their connections with regional elites (Richter, 2005).

In both cases, social organizations presented an opportunity to apply the knowledge, skills and connections they had accumulated during the Soviet period within a new sphere of public action, and so possibly a chance to preserve their status and position in the upheaval of economic transition. It is particularly interesting to see how the demands of the foreign-funded “third sector” dovetailed with existing predispositions in the intellectual class. As Julie Hemment (2000) points out, many members of the intellectual class during the Soviet regime shared with many other members of Russian society an aversion to politics as hypocritical and corrupt, and sought to distinguish themselves from their tawdry environment by embracing abstract notions of morality. For example, the *Druzhiny* interpreted their activism in nature preserves before perestroika in abstract terms of protecting sacred space. This rhetoric ‘effectively shut themselves off from the more mundane environmental concerns of non-professional Soviet people (Weiner, 1999: 434)’ Work in the Third Sector resonated with this ideology of ‘anti-politics’ precisely because it presented itself as a moral realm untainted by politics or partisanship (Hemment, 2000, 2004). It allowed intellectuals to advance abstract principles of global governance, such as sustainable development, discrimination against women, or children’s rights, while spending relatively time on grittier issues such as local chemical waste dumps, homeless children or domestic abuse. (Henderson, 2003) Finally, it introduced them into a new network of professionals and taught them a specialized language and skills that allowed them to maintain their mark of distinction from the rest of society.

Also, despite the donors to induce Russian advocacy organizations to adopt rational, impersonal principles of organizations, still the informal, personal networks that played such an important role in the rest of Russian society infused the Third Sector in Russia as well. At times, such personal loyalty within the group can reinforce the bonds between activists within and between organizations and foster a greater sense of group solidarity (Hemment 2000). Local knowledge of informal relations and practices can also lead local organizers better to resist the pressures from donors and adapt the assistance agencies’ rhetoric, priorities and strategies to suit local conditions better (Ebrahim 2003). But such informal networks can also undermine efforts to promote civil society if they become self-serving cliques that distribute resources according to personal loyalty. (Wedel, 1998; Howard, 2003). In such cases, the presence of foreign funding can exacerbate tensions between organizations rather than promote solidarity (Sperling, 1999). Janine Wedel (1998) describes how such cliques can use
their contacts with foreign donors to become gatekeepers between assistance agencies and other local organizations. In Russia, at least some local activists complained that the resource centers funded by Western assistance agencies, rather than offering information, advice, and other resources freely to other organizations, offered it only to organizations they favored. Some local organizers even complained of a new nomenklatura of Third Sector organizations that used their contacts with foreign donors to influence the distribution of grants (Kay, 2000: 187-206; Richter 2002; Hemment 2000).

Together, the combination of these local and international influences on the constitution and activity of NGOs makes it unlikely that Russian advocacy organizations would have any bargaining leverage with which to resist Putin’s incursions into their autonomy. First, as noted, they remain fairly isolated within Russian society. Dependent on foreign assistance, they remain vulnerable to charges that they serve foreign masters. The fact that foreign assistance encourages activists to take up the language, the skills and the networks of the Third Sector professional does not help to blunt the force of these accusations. But the isolation of these organizations cannot be attributed simply to the disciplines of the global civil society regime: one must consider how these disciplines intersect with existing dispositions and practices in Russian society. In the first instance, the regime attracted segments of society that may have embraced these isolating professional characteristics as marks of distinction and status. In addition, some of them had been captured by more or less insulated informal networks that sought to keep the resources gained from the regime within the group rather than reaching out to the community.

Second, to the extent that the disciplines of the global civil society regime did mold activists into third sector professionals, they may have also diminished their capacity and motivation to resist Putin’s advances. After all, foreign assistance agencies provided grants to professionals who could provide a service, research policy positions and disseminate information in cooperation with local authorities on a non-partisan basis. For the most part, and for most spheres of Third Sector work, these skills could be applied as easily for policy priorities set by Putin as by foreign donors.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the advocacy organizations and their efforts to affect policy are clearly seen as part of the public sphere by most people in Russia, and therefore objects of suspicion (Howard). The fact that they are isolated from the rest of the population, because they do receive funding from foreign donors, and because some of them have been captured by informal networks only reinforces the impression that the public realm is a realm of hypocrisy and corruption and ought to be avoided. Even some of the activists I interviewed, in fact, complained of having to speak in two different languages, one to the donors and one amongst themselves. In this respect, the local activists relation to the donor reproduced the bifurcation of identity resulting from the Soviet period.

Conclusion

The outlook for civil society organizations in Russia does not look good. Because many people believe that organizations funded by the United States and other Western agencies had instigated the defeat of Yanukovich, such organizations in Russia are likely to be regarded with even greater suspicion. This fact not only increases Putin’s incentive...
to control these organizations, but also makes it less likely that Russian society will do anything to prevent it.

Still, I would argue that Putin’s efforts to construct a boundary between the public and private that supports his vision of gosudarstvennost is unstable on two levels. First, his efforts to attract public initiative without giving Russian society a real, independent voice in governance is likely to fail. The lack of popular initiative creates a serious problem for Putin. As the “vertical of power” becomes increasingly centralized and bureaucratized, the center will need autonomous sources of information in order to prevent corruption. Without such autonomous sources of information, his only recourse would be to strengthen central controls even more. Such an approach entails a loss of creativity and increased administrative costs, and will make it impossible for Putin to advance the modernization of Russia that he so desires. Instead, people will continue to retreat into their small, private realms, leading to renewed stagnation.

This leads me to the second, and perhaps most destabilizing contradiction in Putin’s strategy. Putin may misread Russian society’s unwillingness to fight Putin’s efforts to constrict the public realm as an acceptance of his overall philosophy. But, as I argue above, this is not so; it is rather a retreat to the private realm in response to public powerlessness. This sort of refuge requires some measure of economic and social security, which, to some extent, Russian economic growth and continued subsidies for basic living expenses helped provide. As we have seen, however, Putin does not believe it is the state’s role to ensure such security. He has stated over and over again his belief that the state should not venture into areas that private social services and the market can do as efficiently. Thus, there is a fundamental miscommunication going on between rulers and ruled. If Putin proceeds with his plans to expand the market sphere in order to modernize Russia, his policies may threaten that private sphere that many Russians regard as their refuge. And when the regime takes away the possibility of retreat as a possible response to voicelessness, Russian society may again take to the streets.

References


