

Russia's Hobbled Civil Society

Caught between old ideologies and a powerful state

By Barbara von Ow-Freytag

For most Russians, the shock of the early 1990's has discredited the notion of democracy, making it difficult for civil society to prevail over new authoritarian trends and old ideologies. Nevertheless, the struggling civic movement in Russia deserves the West's support.



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There are places where Russia's contradictions come into sharp focus. The little square in the center of Moscow, called Tverskaya Ploshchad, is such a place. Here, within sight of the Kremlin and just behind the luxury boutiques of Tverskaya Street, the capital's old and new, rich and poor collide. Mounted on horseback, the city's legendary founder, prince Yuri Dolgoruky, commands the scene, while opposite, in the red Town Hall, today's city sovereign, Mayor Yuri Lushkov, represents the new political elite of President Putin's Russia. But in the shadow of the powerful, a different group of people is gathering in the small Church of Cosmas and Damian. Twice a week, up to 350 meals are served to the poor in two shifts inside the church. There is usually soup and, if the money stretches, some fruit or salad. A restaurant donates some of the food and volunteers bring the rest.

In today's Moscow extremes exist close to each other; the excesses of the "Golden Billion," of which author Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn speaks, contrast with deep social misery right next door. In that sense Tverskaya Ploshchad mirrors Russian civil society at large. Fifteen years after its new birth, civil society lives between the two dominant shadows of old national myths and Putin's "managed democracy." In his annual "state of the nation" address last year, Putin stressed the strengthening of civil society as a key political objective. Yet since then

the opposite seems to have happened. The all-powerful state apparatus has widened the scope of its authority, while the nongovernmental sector has come under increasing pressure. Controversial new legislation regulating NGO activity has tightened tax laws and is threatening to bring the country's incipient autonomous structures under state control. In social policy, health care, the development of public-welfare institutions and an independent tertiary sector, the frequently discussed "value gap" between the West and Russia seems to be growing.

After 15 years of partnership with Russia, the West is beginning to ask what has gone wrong. Western donors want to know what has become of the innumerable aid programs and the many consulting, partnership and exchange structures. Why have they not achieved more in Russia? Instead of seeing their seed start to bear fruit, the West is reaping ingratitude in the form of an NGO law that is making it difficult to fund civil society structures from abroad.

Russia's contradictions are reflected in the West's ambivalent attitude toward a nation still seen as an exotic and remote place situated somewhere between golden church cupolas and the Asiatic steppes. Although Russia's international integration is still the overriding goal, there are two opposing camps. One consists of the "realists," or pragmatists, who legitimate the authoritarian stage of Putinism as a stabilizing contribution to economic

development. The other camp comprises so-called “idealists,” who continue to believe that Russia can be stable only if it develops free and democratic structures. Under domestic political pressure in the run-up to the 2006 G8 summit, US officials outed themselves as idealists of an almost fundamentalist sort. Almost simultaneously, Germany positioned itself at the other end of the spectrum. After Chancellor Angela Merkel’s meeting with representatives of civil society during her first visit to Moscow, Russian civil society had placed great hopes in German leadership. At the Russo-German summit in Tomsk in April however, it became clear that the realist faction had regained dominance in Berlin’s Russia policy, which focuses on strategic partnership and energy security. This shift links the old German yearning for stability with the traditional notion that Russia is ultimately different—that is, unprepared for, if not incapable of, liberal democracy and best served by an authoritarian state regime.

But is Russia really that different? In *Natasha’s Dance*,¹ British historian Orlando Figes traces the historical lines that have created a unique national culture in Russia. Indisputably, Russia’s vastness, the long survival of serfdom and the Soviet legacy have laid many obstacles on Russia’s path to normal civil society. Yet none of these factors justify the conclusion that Russia’s citizens are not mature enough to develop a modern pluralist society. All in all, some 450,000 NGOs have sprung up since the mid-1990’s. Most still operate on an improvised, volunteer basis, but almost all are now staffed entirely by Russians. Be they chess or sports associations, humani-

tarian organizations, or grassroots initiatives, these groups can hardly hope to instigate a revolution, and the Kremlin knows it. One thing they do show, however, is that individuals are again prepared to take their lives into their own hands. They, more than the wealthy Russians who shape the West’s image of Russia, are the “new Russians” representing a modern Russia and dispelling the myth that their country is condemned to being governed from above. This is what the Putin regime seems to fear most.

The development of civil society under Putin is obstructed by a number of factors that the West must understand better. An insidious nexus of old traditions and new authoritarian trends is undermining the emerging young autonomous structures. Most of all, the old Russian tradition in which “the state ranks above society” has fared well in Putin’s system of bureaucratic authoritarianism.² The return to the traditional state explains much of the trouble with building civil society in Russia. At the same time, despite its democratic rhetoric, the authorities have developed a refined strategy of creating a confusing array of pseudodemocratic structures, which are eroding the very basis of civil society. The West needs to look closely and improve its understanding of Russia’s national peculiarities without allowing itself to be misled. More than anything, Russian civil society needs to be reconfirmed in its mission to finally create a Russia in which the state serves the people and not the other way around.

The Russian Orthodox Church

One intriguing question is why the Russian Orthodox Church is not bet-

A nexus of old traditions and new authoritarian trends dangerously undermine young autonomous civil structures.

1) *Natasha’s Dance: A Cultural History of Russia* (Metropolitan Books, 2002).

2) “Bürokratischer Autoritarismus – Fallen und Herausforderungen,” *Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte*, November 2006.

ter able to fill the socioethical vacuum into which Russia has fallen. Unlike the Christian churches in the West, which have long had a significant function in the social sector, the Orthodox Church has been slow to develop a role of its own. In the Orthodox church, spirituality, liturgy and renunciation of life have always been more important than involvement in society; mysticism and passive suffering have always taken precedence over active service on behalf of others. In the late 19th century's emerging middle-class society, the church had developed a remarkable network of diaconal structures. These, however, were quickly destroyed under the communist regime. Since the end of communism, the orthodox church has experienced an amazing comeback, though the depth of its penetration is hard to assess. Patriarch Alexis II estimates that 70 to 80 percent of the population are practicing Orthodox Christians. Inspired by the progressive reunification with the orthodox church in exile, he speaks of a "second wind" in the revival of Orthodox Christianity.³ Nonetheless, Russian society today is still a far cry from the old ideal of a spiritual and social *sobornost* (community). In the years after the regime change, the church understandably focused on the restoration of churches, training of priests and the recovery of liturgical traditions. Since then, however, it has become increasingly clear that the church is struggling to shape a role for itself as an active social mediator in today's Russia.

An important reason for this difficulty is the traditional affinity between the orthodox church and the Russian state. This relationship, too, has its roots in the Byzantine tradition, from which Russia adopted the theocratic

model of a "symphonic" unity of church and state. The Russian Church was never an autonomous space in which social activity could develop, defining itself traditionally as a state and national church. After being re-established by Stalin during World War II, the official church remained a loyal ally of the state through the Soviet years. This tradition continued after the regime change under Boris Yeltsin during the 1990's. Under Putin, who is intent on having good relations with all religious groups, Orthodoxy has reestablished itself once and for all as a mainstay of the state hierarchy. The old symphonic tradition is regularly revived when high-ranking political figures and the patriarch stand side by side in the gigantic Cathedral of Christ the Redeemer on major religious holidays, most notably at Orthodox Easter.

In the meantime, the new social doctrine of the Russian Orthodox Church, adopted in 2000, has set a new tone. The doctrine is novel since orthodoxy has never had the strong social tradition common of Western churches. A new impetus could grow from the fact that it offers church representatives and, for the first time, also laypersons an orientation for practical engagement in society. At the same time, the church seems to be gradually awakening to the needs of underprivileged groups in society. As late as the 1990's, priests who set up projects to aid young people, orphans, or the elderly regularly came under pressure from their bishops. Since then, the church has become officially engaged in certain areas, such as military and prison chaplaincy. Yet the number of orthodox parishes and monasteries offering social services for marginal groups, such as drug addicts, street children, disabled people or alcoholics remains limited.

Under Putin, the Orthodox Church has reestablished itself once and for all in the power hierarchy.

3) www.interfax-religion.ru.

The Dom Perignon Generation

The rapidly expanding Russian economy is not living up to its potential role as a catalyst to develop civic-mindedness and encourage grassroots commitment. The major Russian merchant families that sprang from the Old Believers movement in the 19th century never defined themselves solely by their wealth but also by their social commitments. Most merchants put their often-immense riches to use for the public welfare. Revered by Slavophiles as the “embodiment of a pure Russian way of life,” these merchants’ philanthropy and support of the arts played a major role in Moscow’s reascendance as a counterpoise to the more Western St. Petersburg. Like the church institutions, this tradition collapsed with the October Revolution. In the Soviet system, every personal initiative undertaken outside state and party control was considered bourgeois and decadent. So far, the new breed of oligarchy of the last 15 years has brought back little of the “pure Russian way of life.” Few representatives of the new Golden Billion are associated with an ethic of public responsibility. The new “Dom Perignon generation” pictured in glossy magazines usually celebrates itself, largely unimpressed by the fact that the gulf between rich and poor is nearing third world conditions. As 26-year-old hotel owner Anna J. puts it, “We all used to want Pepsi. Maybe young Westerners still do, but the new generation in Russia wants champagne!”

Like the church, big business is increasingly finding itself under the state’s thumb. In Putin’s version of state capitalism, business and state also constitute that symphonic unity precluding independent social involvement. Nonetheless, charitable reflexes are beginning to stir. A number of leading oligarchs have set up

philanthropic foundations. The Golden Billion is putting on charity balls, galas and other events for the benefit of children, artists and hospitals. In the media, the new “elite of society” is beginning to care for public well-being. Among entrepreneurs, it is becoming standard to include philanthropy as a line in their balance sheets. Russian organizations have come to account for 30 percent of the Donors’ Forum, an association of Russian and foreign grant-making foundations. According to executive director Natalia Kaminarskaya, Russia now has an annual “philanthropic budget” of approximately \$1.5 billion. Donors’ Forum calculates that charitable organizations accounted for about 1.2 percent of Russia’s GNP in 2003, somewhat more than the share of light industry.

Given Russia’s enormous social problems however, these initiatives remain negligible. The nonprofit sector continues to be weak, lacking a clear legal framework, fiscal development instruments and above all, broad public support. The state does little to encourage philanthropic activity. On the contrary, the persecution of Yukos founder Mikhail Khodorkovsky, who was one the first sponsors of civil society structures through his Open Russia Foundation sent a very negative signal. Support for organizations dedicated to protecting human and civil rights has proven especially problematic, as the bulk of their funding comes from foreign institutions. While Western donors are coming under increasing pressure, Russian sponsors find that aiding such NGOs has become a taboo since the Yukos affair.

Along with these shortcomings, the idea of a special national destiny could also prove fatal for civil society. This myth is as old as Russia itself

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and has always had more to do with an exalted self-image than with the country's realities.

After the collapse of the Byzantine Empire, Moscow declared itself to be the "Third Rome" leading the Christian world. A direct line runs from that assertion to the vision of guiding the socialist world revolution in the 20th century. This tradition was only broken by Gorbachov and Yeltsin, who sought to integrate Russia into the community of values in the "civilized world." Since the "gas war" with Ukraine, Russia has clearly reasserted itself as a leading global player by virtue of its newly-defined capacity as an "energy superpower." Before Putin's annual address this year, rumors even circulated that the president would refloat the Third Rome concept.⁴ This messianic claim is manifest in two gigantic new buildings under construction in the Russian capital: Europe's highest skyscraper and the world's tallest building. Moreover, the deputy head of the Kremlin administration, Vladislav Surkov, has posed a clear alternative to the liberal West by casting a new national ideology defining Russia as a "sovereign democracy."⁵ This notion deliberately plays on the mythical transfiguration of Russia's sovereignty by the Slavophiles of the 19th century. In reality, the feeling dominating in Russia—in stark contrast to the new democracies of central and eastern Europe—is one of not having gained as a nation in the 1990's, but rather of having lost national sovereignty. According to the political journal *Profil*, Surkov's doctrine has already become a "canonical text" but it seems clear that he is forwarding an ideology that serves the

state rather than the people.⁶ By validating the notion of a centralist state structure in which the citizens serve state sovereignty, not vice versa, the new national ideology is proving fatal for civil society.

Unity before Individual Freedom

Equally imbedded in Russian society is another old myth which places the unity of society before the freedom of the individual. This also has historical roots and was abused by czars and communists alike. Again it was Gorbachev and Yeltsin who broke with tradition, establishing individual civil values in Russia for the first time. For most Russians, holding their fate in their own hands after 1990 proved to be a shock that has discredited all notions of democracy for a long time to come. It could turn out to be equally tragic that the Putin regime has linked the stabilization of living conditions to a gradual curtailment of civil freedoms in the name of national unity. The idea of unity has already been canonized, this time by the patriarchate of the Russian Orthodox Church itself. At a people's council attended by high-ranking politicians with Kremlin ties, the church expressly set itself apart from universal human rights values as formulated in the UN declaration.⁷ Ever since, various public figures have touted Russia's higher values, posing them above individual human rights. As in earlier times, the old myth of a pure, organic Russia that refutes the false, mendacious West is being held high, most prominently by Solzhenitsyn. In the most recent incident, Moscow's mayor, Yury Lushkov, banned a homosexual demonstration in the city

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4) Article by Marat Khairullin and Dimitrij Balburow in *Gazeta*, April 14, 2006

5) www.edinros.ru/news.html?id=111148.

6) *Profil*, April 3, 2006.

7) Text of the resolution, www.interfax-religion.com/?act=news&div=1252

center, noting Russian values.⁸ Most emphatically, Eurasian ideologue Alexander Dugin has embraced the old code of Russian virtues, citing a “different kind” of democracy created by historical Russia—one based on the principles of brotherhood, integrity and community spirit. In this view society is “not only” a collection of free individuals, but rather a superordinate “living organism.” In Russia’s perception of itself, “what is public always takes precedence over what is private.”⁹

This type of thinking threatens to undermine the very substance of Russia’s slowly emerging civil society. While never tiring of stressing how different Russia is, the state continues to do everything possible to keep up a democratic edifice. Appearing to signal the development of civil society to the outside world, these efforts only help to marginalize the authentically rooted, liberal structures outside state control. The leading superstructure of the Kremlin’s political technocrats is the *obshchestvennaya palata* (social chamber) founded in 2005. Officially set up to serve as an advocate of civil rights and interests, the chamber has long shown itself to be a dummy institution buttressing the state. From the outset, civil rights organizations have criticized the chamber as an instrument of manipulation “intended to imitate participation of civil society in the control of the country.”¹⁰ With a selection procedure screened by the president’s administrative staff, the

chamber is composed almost exclusively of state-minded functionaries. Steered by the Kremlin and funded from the federal budget, the task of the social chamber is clearly not to promote civil society, but to direct and control it. Western actors run the risk of legitimating such pseudodemocratic institutions by cooperating with them too closely. In view of the ambivalent experience of the “Petersburg dialog,” signals of support sent to Russian civil society ought to be more carefully considered and planned.

All these measures ultimately stem from the fact that the “powerful” are afraid of their own society. The growing climate of state tutelage fosters the very reflexes that have traditionally weakened Russian society: bureaucratic arbitrariness, lawlessness and corruption, coupled with a growing passivity and cynicism in the population. These forces ultimately brought down the Soviet Union. For the first time in its history, Russia has the chance to modernize through a concerted effort of the rulers and the ruled. For all its impressive economic statistics, Russia remains confronted with severe existential problems: endemic corruption, the spread of drug abuse and AIDS, growing xenophobia and a demographic crisis of biblical proportions. Neither pipelines, nor old myths nor pseudodemocratic structures will help Russia cope with any of these challenges. To survive and modernize, Russia needs the involvement of its entire, unique, multilayered population.

Insidiously, the same state that today never tires of stressing how different Russia is, continues to do everything possible to keep up a democratic edifice.

8) *Moskovskije Nowosti*, April 28, 2006.

9) *Argumenty i Fakty*, No. 16, April, 19 2006.

10) www.memorial.de/nachr.php?nid=83.