

How can Russian civil society be supported in turbulent times? Responses from a stakeholder survey

Introduction

In the shadow of the Ukraine crisis and legislative decisions from Moscow that are increasingly framing Russia's public interest sector in 'social versus political' terms, considerable discussion has once again erupted in the West about the role and development potential of Russian civil society. After enacting the foreign agent law in 2012, the Duma adopted new provisions just last year that were intended to clarify the distinction between social and political organizations and make it easier to identify "foreign agent activities." All of this can be interpreted as an attempt to differentiate between 'good' and 'bad' civil society. In the eyes of many of those observing developments in this area it seems obvious that there is a need for the provision of support to initiatives and organizations close to the opposition movement. Other possible strategies (strategies also put forward by well-informed experts on Russian civil society) do present themselves however, when one asks representatives of organizations that are directly engaged in charitable work in Russia or helping in other ways on the ground to ease social problems how they might be helped there. These alternative strategies essentially rely on the approach of building up the professional capacities of (social) service organizations right at the interface between those organizations and political actors, in the broader sense of that term.

Civil society and the third sector in Russia

The terms 'civil society' and 'third sector' are often used synonymously, although they describe different facets of civic self-organization and two

different focuses of organizational activity: the concept of the third sector, in the sense of the provision of social services, focuses on non-governmental and non-market-oriented (non-profit) organizations that contribute to the public good through social and charitable services without being focused primarily on economic returns. The concept of civil society, on the other hand, is bound up with a more political understanding that emphasises the rights and the opportunities of citizens – both as individuals and in organized forms – to take action to benefit their communities or promote their interests and values. The boundary between ‘non-governmental organizations’ (NGOs) and state hierarchies can be defined first and foremost through this type of action.

The two concepts refer to the opposite ends of a continuum of ideal types, the two poles between which a public interest organization takes shape. While ‘third sector’ refers, from a ‘system functional’ perspective, to the sector coordinates between the state, the market and the family, the concept of civil society – with a greater focus on action and interaction – relates to the aspects of self-organization, co-determination and advocacy. The two modes of interpretation are not in conflict with one another: each emphasises the model formative for it in the public discourse. Individual organizations do not normally correspond to one type only; instead they encompass, in varying combinations, elements of both concepts in their behaviours and the objectives set down in their charters. However, it is possible to categorise them under one of the two guiding principles in order to reduce the level of complexity.

We use this differentiation as a means to clear an analytical path through the great expanse and heterogeneity of Russia’s civil society and third sector. Thus we are assuming that it is possible to apply the distinction between two types of organization set out below to a large portion of the public interest organizations:

1. Organizations characterised by the fact that they *render social services*, e.g. in areas like care of the elderly, poverty relief or addiction prevention, as an alternative to services provided by state welfare institutions, market-conforming enterprises or, informally, by private persons (see Anheier, 2014).
2. Organizations that can be described as ‘political’, in the broader sense of that term, because they act in the context of public debate and/or of specific decision-making processes *either* directly to promote certain causes, interests, social groups etc. *or* indirectly to change the way a problem is perceived or interpreted by creating a public space for a community to engage in a particular lifestyle or live in accordance with personal inc-

linations, convictions or world views (i.e., in the final analysis, the conditions necessary for the creation of social and cultural capital). Organizations of this kind help justify an understanding of civil society as aiming to open up political –public interactions to the private sphere (see Offe, 2000).

Over the past two decades, a broad spectrum of organizations working on a wide variety of public interest issues has emerged in Russia. Unlike the third sector organizations pursuing primarily social and charitable activities, now supported by a state that looks on them benevolently, genuine civil society actors are having a difficult time holding their own, partly due to historical cultural patterns (particularly as a result of the Soviet period) and partly to the general political climate in today's Russia. Observers in the West are therefore wondering how Russian civil society can be supported in a way that avoids the pitfalls of ignoring the social and political conditions in the country and attempting to import a normative (western) notion of public spirit and civil society.

In view of the problems many organizations are facing, it would be short-sighted to determine that support should go *only* to politically active organizations, such as those with direct or indirect ties to the opposition movement or the trade unions. The outcome of such strategies would be uncertain, their success, if any, difficult to measure, and moreover, in all probability, they also entail risks. The alternative would be a long-term commitment to supporting the sector's infrastructure, in the sense of extensive 'capacity building'. In addition to supporting established service structures, the capacity building in question could indirectly benefit civil society in other ways (i.e. in the sense of promoting the continued development of the scope available for civic self-organization and of a specifically Russian culture of the common good). The results of our study on civil society and the third sector in Russia (Kehl et al., 2015), based on ten guided interviews conducted with recognised experts from foundations, NGOs, charities and researchers (for the most part from Moscow and/or with a correspondingly metropolitan and 'political' outlook) last year (2014), led us to this conclusion.

Weakness of civic engagement

In the eyes of 'stakeholders' in Russian civil society (i.e. actors who, as the representatives of foundations, NGOs or charities, have an interest in Russian civil society and qualified experts who can provide information about

perceptions in the field) it is an irrefutable fact that to this day the legacy of the Soviet Union continues to affect the collective self-image and the institutional requirements placed on forms of civil self-organization in the country. Political civil society culture is influenced by the powerful role of the state and a public's concept of itself, which has virtually no place for the notion of taking action outside of local and personal contexts to promote the public interest. As a result, there has been only limited scope available for societal self-organization, and where such scope is open, it has not necessarily been filled. This is confirmed by the figures showing that only about six percent of the Russian population regularly donate money to civil society (or third-sector) organizations – a strikingly low value compared to that of other countries – and that not even one in five Russians regularly engages in volunteer work (see CAF, 2013). A civil society sphere between the state, the economy and the private does not (yet) seem to have established itself culturally within the Russian self-concept. One of our interview partners had this to say on this point:

“This is a legacy of the Soviet period, the fact that society is not used to the idea that anything can be done [in an open space] between the state and private life. As a result, this ‘open space’ has been unknown up to now!”

Another participant in the study drove the point home in this way:

“I think that in our mentality – in the mentality of the Russian population – there is no concept of a ‘civil society’.”

Negative developments in the transformation years

What is more: although the years of transformation brought Russian society freedoms it had not previously known, that same period was also very unsettling for large portions of the population. The new freedom was accompanied by legal uncertainty that to many more was a source of anxiety rather than an impetus civic engagement. For that reason, the momentum for the development of the third sector in the 1990s came, to a substantial degree, from foreign foundations that did development work and brought grant money to the country. Not infrequently, support for the development of civil society structures and culture was guided by the normative model of the western funding institution; a well-meant effort, but one that often took on a missionary character. Moreover ‘fake’ organizations that pursued essentially private, commercial and sometimes even criminal objectives cast a pall of suspicion over the sector. Already low, the public's trust in the sector sank even further. Meanwhile, the involvement of foreign foundations

in Russian society had become a target of criticism in the public discourse. This issue cropped up in our interviews in statements like these:

Plus, there is very little trust among the public. This is something I have also noticed in my work: if a stranger comes from outside and says, “let’s work on this now,” people have no confidence that the intent is to do good, that it’s not about someone trying to make money, or gain some personal advantage but really is about other people, about the people who will be affected next time, about doing something good. And the same applies to organizations as well.

Nevertheless: according to Mersijanowa and Jakobson (2010, p.10), there are around 136,000 organizations in Russia that can be identified as explicitly third-sector organizations: these are primarily small organizations, many of which have trouble financing themselves. Large, financially secure actors are the exception.

Social service providers versus political advocates?

An analysis of the third sector and civil society structures with reference to the two types described at the start of this paper (as a sector of social service providers or political advocates) does lead to the identification of some organizations with an explicit focus on political topics or that make public statements criticising the system (such as human rights organizations). However the number of organizations that devote themselves as social service providers to the country’s *public welfare challenges* is far greater. In recent years, the socially-oriented (to use the government’s word) organizations have managed to continually improve their public ‘standing’ and thereby win back some of the lost trust in the sector.

The political climate vis-à-vis the third sector has changed and become more discriminating during Putin’s presidency, however. The two categories of social service provision and political advocacy also lend themselves well to depicting political approaches to civil society: ‘socially oriented’ organizations now have substantial opportunities to obtain state grant money. In contrast, organizations whose efforts are bent toward compliance with rule of law principles or which scrutinise the government’s work are subject to stringent controls and are impeded in their work.

While in the 1990s, the Yeltsin government clearly did not do much *for*, but also not much *against* Russia’s third-sector organizations, during Putin’s presidency these organizations were managed so as to greatly increase their visibility (see Henderson, 2011). Putin has referred to the importance of the

third sector in many of his speeches, his favourable assessment pertaining principally to ‘socially oriented’ organizations. In contrast, the state takes a considerably less positive view of critically-minded civil society, a point emphasised many times in our interviews. The following quotation from the interview material serves as an example:

“I think that the Russian political sphere – and this includes the state, at the highest position – has a big stake in retaining its power monopoly, and it has also learned from the experiences in which power was lost in friendly communist countries. Everywhere that losses of power have come about in Eastern Europe, they came about because the country’s leaders, the government, were unable to curb resistance against policies sufficiently to keep it from growing so large that it simply wiped the societal situation aside, as though with the stroke of a pen. And that means ...: civil society harms the [efforts of the] current government in Russia to ensure the continuation of its work.”

The role of the Russian state

This is only one side of the coin, however: a massive expansion in the state’s funding of organizations that work on social problems has been observed for several years. For some time now, the state has been offering these ‘socially oriented’ organizations the opportunity to apply for substantial project grants to carry out their projects in the social services field. Thus, the message that the focus on social issues is a model to be followed is communicated to the sector or to (civil) society by politicians and the state administration. This was described in this way in our interviews:

“What the Russian state and all of the experts are trying to emphasise quite generally is that civil society’s primary purpose is to work on social issues, that social security and helping people in need are the whole point. That is the leitmotif, so to speak, of civil society. ... At the highest levels of the state, on the part of the president, there is an emphasis that social issues are the primary focus of the work of third sector organizations. ... So if an NGO wants to follow the trend, it should pursue a ‘social orientation’.”

Putin’s government began setting up project funding structures some years ago. The funding is provided over both a presidential fund and ministerial

instruments. In line with this strategy, in 2014 new legal provisions were adopted to clarify the distinction between social and political organizations and facilitate the identification of “foreign agent activities.” Judging by our impressions from the interviews, another of its aims was to separate ‘good’ civil society from ‘bad’ civil society.

The consequences of the Ukraine crisis

At present, it is difficult to predict the future of Russia’s civil society and third sector, particularly given the developments in Ukraine, the intensification of nationalist tendencies and what the stakeholders we interviewed reported as Russia closing itself off from foreign actors. That notwithstanding, the findings from our empirical research, formulated below, do allow an assessment concerning what is currently a very uncertain field:

- First, among the organizations, the prevailing mood overall is one of uncertainty about the government’s practices, the primary characteristic of which is clearly unpredictability. Unsurprisingly, this affects the ‘politically oriented’ organizations to a far greater extent than the ‘socially oriented’ ones. Due to the Ukraine crisis and intensifying nationalistic tendencies in politics and society, organizations that feel a duty to promote societal pluralism or work on critical issues are encountering ever growing difficulties.
- Russia’s political relations with its western neighbours have deteriorated considerably in conjunction with the Ukraine crisis; this development has been largely responsible for a major loss in trust and the deterioration of what had, for some time, been a good atmosphere.
- The Russian state made it far more difficult for foreign funding sources to provide support to the politically active sector (with the introduction of the foreign agent law in 2012 if not before). One must assume that this policy will not change in the short or long term.
- In all likelihood, the state funding of ‘socially oriented’ organizations will continue, perhaps even be expanded. This provides state-funded actors with potential for further development, though it comes with the risk that the financing will be paid for with system-conformity. The continuation of this type of policy depends largely on future economic developments in the country because state revenue, from the energy sector in particular, will determine the extent to which such funding is sustainable.

Prospects for civil society and the third sector

Given these conditions, what kind of options for supporting Russian civil society and the third sector exist? Does a ‘focus on democracy’ demand that extra support now be channelled to politically active organizations?

If one believes our interview partners, this may not be the ideal course. Many observers do see partnering with the part of civil society working on advocacy issues as being desirable. However, at present it appears doubtful, at best, that partnerships with critical or oppositional actors could, by circumventing the administrative level, succeed; moreover, the attempt entails risks for everyone involved. Kremlin policy is not the only (perhaps not even the primary) reason for this; one must also consider the general mood in the country. The alternatives lie in supporting and continuing development of the sector as one of service providers. This kind of strategy rests on the notion that extensive capacity building (i.e. strengthening capacities by building up expertise and infrastructures) would indirectly enable the organizations that focus primarily on social problems to develop a collective voice that would, indirectly, have a political dimension. The intent in this respect is to increase the professionalism with which the organizations interact with the ‘big players’ – i.e. including in the competition with the state and market for resources. One final quote from our interviews addressing this point:

“There is a need for the sector’s professionalisation Because there are in fact people out there who want to work in the sector. We don’t have enough training programmes though. People entering the sector are coming from quite different sectors, not necessarily the NGO scene. And the other point is that in their search for professional staff the NGO sector are increasingly having to compete as employers not only with the business world, but also with the state – and the state is a good employer. These days, the NGO sector is trying to find its place in the labour market. Professionalisation of the sector is important for that reason as well.”

This suggests that support in the following areas would be indicated:

- **Organizational development and professionalisation:** Many organizations’ capacities in the area of personnel development/professionalisation are underdeveloped, in a situation in which they are (supposed to be) taking over key social functions and recruiting in a competitive employment market to that end. Professional development and process organization within the organizations is vital for the sector’s continuing development.

- **Structures for advanced education and partnerships:** Russia has virtually no academic programmes in non-profit management and philanthropy. Organizations can have trouble with recruitment; at the same time, knowledge transfer and the development of innovative concepts and debates are prevented within the sector. There is a need to build up academic institutions in the country, but also a need to develop international partnerships with institutions abroad.
- **Exchange programmes:** Intercultural exchange is an effective form of communication and understanding, beyond the bounds of diplomatic convention, which all parties want; in such contexts, understanding between nations is experienced at first hand and is made 'real' through encounters between actual people. Trust-building forms of this kind can be made feasible or at least encouraged through city partnerships, exchange programmes or travel grants.
- **Networking of organizations:** Many organizations in Russia (still) see one another more as rivals than partners. Yet partnerships and networking within the sector promotes knowledge transfer, results in skills acquisition, enhances the system's visibility and facilitates the development of a collective – political – voice. All of these aspects should be supported.
- **Earning trust in society:** Earning society's trust will remain one of the central tasks of Russian non-profits and NGOs. Though some progress has been made in this respect, one challenge certainly remains: communicating the roles and the values of action that is explicitly civil society in character to people in society.
- **Setting up long-term partnerships based on equality:** Finally, there is a need for setting up long term partnerships with the Russian third sector and civil society in which the Russian organization acts as a strategic cooperation partner who is expected to bring dedication and commitment to the partnership that is equal in measure to the scope for self-determination and latitude to design projects independently that they receive in exchange.

Unlike the interventions by western actors in the 1990s, briefly described towards the beginning of this paper, which in retrospect are seen to some extent as 'interference' (albeit well-meant), the strategies presented here, or so our interview partners believe, will lead to greater consideration of the country's social and political environment and transform the role of foreign organizations into a more moderating one. The experts interviewed believe that these strategies represent one possible way of supporting Russian civil society in very turbulent times. They constitute an attempt to

indicate options for strengthening civic impulses in a society in which the general environment is currently rather unfavourable in that respect.

Capacity building could make it possible for service-providing organizations to enhance their role as a powerful ‘voice’ in society. These kinds of strategies imply no disapproval of advocacy-oriented civil society nor do they legitimise the Kremlin policies. Quite the contrary: professionalisation and partnership programmes would be a means of working towards strengthening infrastructure and self-organization capacities in civil society. Ideally, this could lead to the formation of a politically effective voice. Such programmes need not necessarily focus only on the organizations recognised as ‘socially-oriented’, but could instead encompass the entire spectrum of public-interest oriented activities in the social services. However: organizations in the sector increase their influence by cooperating with state institutions and making themselves irreplaceable through their work. The more professional the organizations become, and the more the sector builds up its own identity and puts forward a collective agenda, the greater are the chances that the organizations will be able to influence political processes. Thus, in a sense, the idea is to strengthen civil society development ‘through the back door’ by strengthening the third sector in its role as a strong service provider.

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