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Preliminary Thought Papers

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Session 531

Russian Civil Society Symposium: Building Bridges to the Future

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Discussion paper for the Salzburg Global Seminar

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By **Polina Filippova**, Director for Programs and Donor Services, Charities Aid
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Twenty five years have passed since the beginning of reforms in Russia and the former Soviet Union. Sadly, most traditional civil society institutes typical in the Western world have not taken proper root in Russia. Out of those institutes founded after the fall of the Soviet Union, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are among those few which have not only survived but developed and matured most.

The NGO sector has grown from a marginal phenomenon mainly supported by “Western” money into a well-established diversified sector. Many NGOs started from direct humanitarian aid. Now they provide services to vulnerable groups, some of which do not get any assistance from the state. The sector truly reflects the needs of people and introduces new concepts and values, working on creating a more humane Russian society. The sector has offered new approaches to the most pressing social maladies of Russia – child abandonment (shelters, foster families), status of children and people with disabilities (integration and inclusion), assistance to sick and dying (hospices) and others. The concept of the quality of life, one of the basic ideas in developed countries, still pretty new in Russia, has been introduced by the non-profit sector.

In the absence of real political life the not-for-profit sector has become one of the few areas where social problems can be voiced and addressed, active people can express themselves. As most surveys and polls indicate, core human rights are not among the priorities of Russian citizens. At the same time socio-economic rights are understood and perceived much better. People who actively work on securing their own or their children’s rights on equal access to medicine, education, or employment inevitably become active citizens with an understanding of the supremacy of human rights and dignity.

Recently, the economic environment has significantly changed and so have the sources of finance for NGOs. The economic crisis has seriously affected corporate donations to NGOs and the changes in the political situation led to a drastic reduction in the level of international agencies’ and foundations’ funds to Russia. The sector has become much more dependent on private donations and state funding. In order to get access to these funds NGOs need to learn how to communicate to these new audiences and clearly explain what they are about and what is the added value they create. Meanwhile the sector has no adequate answer to this challenge. It is not only a problem of the lack of PR skills. The sector has changed a lot in these 20-25 years. The time has come to revise its values, mission and identity.

The issue of funding, though very serious, is not the only concern for the not-for-profits. The most serious threat is increasing political pressure. It is being implemented on several levels. There were several new pieces of legislation adopted in recent times. The most notorious one is the law “On regulation of activities of the NGOs, which fulfill the functions of foreign agents”. Sadly, the name adequately reflects the essence of the law. It requires that all NGOs, which have any foreign funding and “participate in political activities on the territory of the Russian Federation”, register as foreign agents. “An NGO is recognized as one ...if it participates in the organization and implementation of political activities which aim to influence decisions of state authorities, their policy, as well as in the formation of public opinion...”

These NGOs which are voluntarily registered, have to include this newly acquired status of a “foreign agent” in all their documents, publications and PR materials. There are quite a few other responsibilities which these foreign agents have to fulfill in order to comply with the law. They will have to submit reports on their activities quarterly (now it is once a year), will undergo annual audit (now compulsory only for foundations), etc.

Those NGOs which fail to register, can be de facto closed down – their activities can be suspended by authorities for up to 6 months and their bank accounts frozen. An NGO is provided with the right to appeal to a court to overrule this suspension and prove that it has not been engaged in “political activities” using foreign money. This task seems to be impossible and not only because of the notorious corruption of Russian courts. The problem is that the definitions of “political activities” and “foreign money” are drawn so broadly that almost anything can fall under them.

Since the adoption of this law more than 2,000 NGOs across the country have been investigated by the prosecution authorities, including organizations as distant from any political agenda as charities acting in favor of children with rare genetic diseases.

This law has been recently reinforced by new legislation, which allows prosecution offices to investigate NGOs any time without any special warning.

This legal attack has been reinforced by an active defamation campaign in Mass Media. NGOs have been described as a “fifth column” subsidized by the West. Even those NGOs, which are accepted by the state are being described and treated as a minor and irrelevant addition to the state welfare system.

Another challenge is of an internal nature. It is an expansion of the sector in several directions – social entrepreneurs, volunteers, pseudo NGOs inspired by the state, municipal

providers of social services etc. They erode the traditional boundaries of the sector, compete with NGOs for resources, and sometimes present reputational risks. On the other hand many of these new players are natural allies for NGOs, who can bring new ideas, new blood and new resources to traditional organizations. How do we distinguish between the former and the latter? Which criteria apart from “gut feeling” can help here? In order to identify potential partners from alien structures we should clearly identify ourselves, answer the questions by which principles do we operate? Which values do we promote?

The sector urgently needs consolidation. The threats and challenges are too serious to be tackled individually. This consolidation can be based on a renewed identity. We need to articulate clearly who we are and what is the social impact of the not-for-profit sector. As it can hardly be accounted for in the GNP figures, we should formulate a positive image based on the unique role and impact of the sector.

Individual wellbeing is a concept promoted on an institutional level exclusively by NGOs in Russia. No matter what is the area of activities – ecology, assistance to vulnerable groups, education, human rights and others – all NGOs work on improving different aspects of individual well-being. It is in the core of all our efforts.

This concept, along with the concept of quality of life, is well developed in other countries and has become one of the key indicators of a successful society. Individual wellbeing is not just an abstract humanitarian notion. There has been a growing body of research into what contributes to the quality of people’s experiences of their lives. This has enabled a new understanding of the factors that both influence and constitute well-being. The science of ‘subjective well-being’ suggests that as well as experiencing good feelings, people need:

- a sense of individual vitality
- to undertake activities which are meaningful, engaging, and which make them feel competent and autonomous
- a stock of inner resources to help them cope when things go wrong and be resilient to changes beyond their immediate control.

It is also crucial that people feel a sense of relatedness to other people, so that in addition to the personal, internally focused elements, people’s social experiences – the

degree to which they have supportive relationships and a sense of connection with others – form a vital aspect of well-being.

Another strength of this concept is its measurability. New Economic Foundation, a British think-tank has designed a framework for measuring projects' and organizations' impact on wellbeing of their target audiences. SROI – social return on investment - allows the results of not-for-profits efforts to be presented in economic terms. This framework has incorporated approaches and findings of the Cross-National Survey on individual wellbeing conducted in more than 20 countries in 2006-2007.

The concept of individual wellbeing can become a consolidation factor to unite different NGOs. It will allow us to find new partners among the new players (volunteers, social entrepreneurs, etc.) and adequately present the sector to the general public. A consolidated sector with a clear and positive identity is a bridge to a more stable and productive future.



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By **Svetlana Makovetskaya**, Director, GRANI Foundation

Important things for understanding the situation in civil society and non-political activism:

1. Complication and Inconsistency. In the last 3-4 years in modern Russia many new and different practices of civil activity appeared and they function simultaneously. They function at the same time together with old NGOs and civil groups and form several generations of activists, who are self-organized and united because of different reasons and based on different rules, in different spheres, in different, often diametrically opposed, styles of representation. An attempt to find in this diversity a core, recognized leaders, who speak for the entire civil society and represent interests of the entire civil society - is a big delusion.

2. Self-organization of traditionalists. The ratio of public sector activist groups and NGOs that are representing citizens oriented at archaic or modernization changed. The most visible that has appeared, and became publicly splashy, are new “protective” or “traditionalist” unions of citizens that see in December events a threat of increasing violence in the streets and also a challenge to traditional cultural and state values and so forth. At the same time, they use the same modern activist technologies and methods that are used by those whom they oppose (political satire, Internet-activism, etc.).

3. Refusal of a language of “democratization package”. New actors (those who act in a direction of modernization of some aspects of life as well as those who act in interests of guarding against “not-right changes”) do not use “key words” from a traditional civil activist vocabulary, offering non-conventional (for established civil activists) language, public gesture, instruments, a way of self-identification and self-presentation. An attempt to find a natural Russian civil identification led to the fact that the language of “the right of people and democracy” is no longer a universal specialized non-state language of civil activists, even if objectively those activists are engaged in practices of democratization.

4. Crisis of Western-oriented NGOs. It happened that activities of Western-oriented NGOs (they exist for the last 20-15 years) are partially

“encapsulated” and “fundamentalized”. On one hand, it is due to the state (and civil!) pressure on the activity of NGOs that receive foreign financial support, because of tightening of Russian legislation. On the other hand, it became a consequence of absence of real civil discussion about a strategy and meaning of non-commercial activity out of reaction to state activities, and also stressed support of those NGOs on non-criticized and non-questioned values and forms of activities, also the use of appeal to international institutions and foreign countries as a mean of always justified form of pressure on Russian authorities.

5. Crisis of trust and culture of solidary action. It is extremely difficult to form new coalitions and cooperative connections between NGOs. Quite often activists (more often new actors) take thorough care to make sure their reputation will not suffer from public interaction with organizations (including NGOs, parties, institutions) with an established (and not always positive) image; they are also inclined to suspect their potential partners in intentional “usage” (organizationally to absorb, to assume somebody else’s accomplishments, to establish their name on behalf of somebody else, etc.) of new initiatives being indifferent toward its content, motivation, etc. Moreover, non-established practice of self-regulation of NGOs is another restriction on the formation of coalitions. This self-regulation could have supported this unity of formation through formulated and open rules of acceptance and exception for a failure of mutual obligations. Periodic discussions about self-regulation always bump up against the unpreparedness of coalitions of NGOs to use firm rules toward “their own”.

6. New civil style. The style of civil activity is changing and has become extremely varied., from “civil feat” to “civil entertainment”. Firstly, in some cases, activists use “technologically advanced” or specialized fashionable activity (that includes extensive use of IT and professional artistic actions) to the degree that it becomes difficult to distinguish between civil activity and professional creativity or leisure. That has led to a more frequent use of a new style of public presentation of civil interest and self-organization, for example, different creative forms of public satire, civic-cultural education, street actions, performances, etc. Secondly, within activist groups and members of public activities, a group of “quasi-consumers” is

appearing, those people who are ready to join an existing initiative for “a couple of hours” in case they have free time or money.

7. Different relationships to public activity from population, state organs and media. The attitudes of the population, state institutions and media changed and partially radicalized toward NGOs’ activities. On one hand, the crisis of political engagement, increasing discontent of “life with an unclear future”, and also increasing irritation in a form of quasi-official and philistine anti-americanism and anti-westerness, led to a partial transfer of discontent of the population from “professionals” – state , political parties, theorists and missionaries – to NGOs and a publicly-active “urban class”. Financial support received by NGOs is not qualified as an investment in human capital but is considered a form of financing of any activity “by order”. On the other hand, “the reform of public management “ in Russia assumes that bureaucracy interacts more intensely with NGOs and active groups in the sphere of “open government”, “open budget”, “boards of trustees”, independent evaluation of institutions, etc. The successful practice of this kind of interaction does exist. Simultaneously, the population gets involved in the support of civil initiatives, but only in a form of understandable charity and volunteerism in crisis situations, but in unprecedented (until 2010) volumes, also with public acceptance of these initiatives as the public good. Less visible, but sufficiently common, are urban and rural initiatives aimed at the creation of additional public services for particular groups and communities. Such initiatives – garbage cleaning, vegetarian networks, services for families with children, etc. – form public services without referring to budget or officials responsible for making decisions, and they improve the quality of local life through self-organization which is understandable and accepted by local communities.

8. Radicalization and pseudo-radicalization in public sphere. Anti-western and anti-patriotic rhetoric in equal degree constantly splits the society, forming a space for “cold civil war”. Pubic sphere is “warping”: a reduction of a formalized media competes with an increase in platforms for discussions and information from Internet. In a situation of informational “noise” there is a lack of positional texts presenting NGO-activity out of the proposed design “persecutor-victim-defensive”,

and considering the inconsistencies of relationships between the state, population and civil activists. The fight for majority opinion to change NGO laws didn't achieve at least a partial clarification about civil activity and formation of its supporters. In general, with the presence of constant informational triggers of "patriotism/anti-patriotism" the relationship toward civil society is changeable: those who used to sympathize, become indifferent; those who used to be indifferent feel hostility; and those who didn't like it became radical enemies. NGOs and traditional public unions lost a fight to have "explainers" (journalists, teachers, etc.), on "their side" and now many of these outlets are tightly connected with serving the state and international interests. The same situation is with the "pro-state" public: the authorities know how to put pressure on "non-conformists" but didn't learn how to retain independence of those with similar points of view in the public sphere. Finally, the role of bloggers with civil ambitions is exaggerated since they don't go beyond writing the texts, and with rare exceptions, they don't join the practical activities that they are writing about.

Below we will try to offer several strategies for "healthier" future of civil society in Russia.

Overcoming of isolation and marginalization

Civil organizations need to overcome the marginalization of topics related to "civil activity" in the public sphere and the growing isolation of such organizations in society. We are talking about several directions.

Firstly, a clear, responsible and non-victim position in relationship to authority's activities is required. It's extremely important to publicly oppose, with sound arguments, attempts to discredit, parody and manipulate information about civil society. It's no less important to use and develop a mechanism of participation of citizens in decision-making in social life and public government.

Secondly, it's important to earn public trust again. Not only those of Russians who are "natural" allies of civil organizations. It requires the practical involvement of different segments of society in decision making. It is necessary to constantly detect, describe and distribute "the stories of civil success".

Finally, it's vitally important to expand the images of civil activists, their personal stories, to form "galleries of new and different heroes", whose visions are understandable to a common person.

Search for a new language and formation of a new civil agenda

Serious renewal of civil language and formation of modern civil texts is required. To develop social capital, civil organizations need to address a diverse segment of society, and therefore should avoid narrow specialized terminology and jargon. It's important to make timely and genuine civil interpretation of problems that people have interacting with other people and with authority as a "key" to understanding of "social discomfort".

Then, it's important to overcome a deficit of powerful program texts that comprehend a place of civil activity in modern Russia, form civil values and civil institutions in the country's "agenda". The majority of fundamental civil and human rights texts are morally outdated. They speak a different language, to different people and about different realities. New texts need to be distributed and have resonance far beyond the circle of activists.

These new texts should provide new meaningful space. They might give answers to real life problems which are currently ignored. It is extremely important, for example, to discuss problems of civil patriotism, Russian national self-identification in civil culture; it's critical to understand the results of the use of "international pressure" for maintaining international legal standards, etc.

Moreover, radicalization and even revanchism which is developing in Russian society requires social organizations to be mediators in conflict zones and leaders of new discussions. Therefore, the civil language should be suitable for usage by different neighboring groups of people, including those that do not currently dialogue with one another.

Delimitation and new coalitions

Civil organizations should make a tough decision: to dissociate from those organizations whose activities and values are unacceptable, and unite with those that are ready to support shared norms and rules. We are not talking here about a separation

between “clean” and “not-clean”. We assume that civil organizations will be able to offer self-regulation of their own activities.

Though there is a diversity of civil players, they should be able to clarify their acceptance of, or disagreement with, certain rules. The meaning of self-regulation requires that institutions become transparent about differences/disagreement, to demonstrate to the wider society different coalitions and systems of civil organizations, and to demonstrate a freedom of choice around different systems.

The possibility of self-regulation becomes a need for self-regulation, if civil organizations don't want to be misunderstood, opaque and/or shut down. The behaviours that NGOs demand of the state or businesses, should be the same behaviours they demand of themselves and their peers.

Civil activity the same as any other one may be controlled by the society.

Self-education and support of activists

It is necessary to modernize the range of educational support for activists, including NGOs, and to further build the human capital in the civil sector. First of all, this improves their leadership potential and, therefore, intensifies processes in civil societies. Secondly, it creates a group of people who are able to teach others. As a result, it creates a mechanism for reproduction of activists who are knowledgeable about changing context of life in the country. It's necessary to use a library of Russian activists' cases for education of NGO specialists and local activists.



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By **Marina Pisklakova-Parker**, President, ANNA – Center for
Prevention of Violence

The situation of civil society in Russia has to be considered within a framework of historical context of the Soviet time and transition from that for the last 20 years. It is also important to remember that many NGOs on the ground have to deal with the mentality leftover from the Soviet approach, both among the general public and, especially, among local authorities.

The main issues for Civil Society in the Russian Federation in the current situation could be defined as the following:

- There is no clarity about the role of the Civil society organizations among the general public which leads to the lack of support;

There is a controversial understanding in the minds of average citizens (including some authorities) regarding what a civil society organization is. It actually starts with a lack of clear vision of what civil society is. There is still some memory of what was considered “public activity” during the soviet times, which meant either being connected closely with the State or being a dissident. Both of these interpretations of what a civil society group is, lead to a lack of trust, to fear, to quite vague understanding of motives and, as a result, limited association among the general public with most of NGOs.

For example, most of the support that businesses provide to non-profit organizations is focused in the area of supporting children in need, disabled, especially disabled and ill children, and orphanages. It is because these types of activities are in a way “obvious” in terms of who are the vulnerable groups and do not require any extra defining of personal views and values. In other words, they are easier to understand.

On the other hand, issues like political rights, women’s rights, and even environmental issues are less obvious and require an effort to reach deeper understanding of their value, unless people experience discrimination personally and also understand that it was a violation of rights.

- Tightened legislation on operation of an NGO in the Russian Federation;

The legislation defining some NGOs as “foreign agents” affected the Russian NGO community in many ways. For one, operationally - in terms of shortage of funding

opportunities. But additionally, it made NGOs and human rights issues look like something foreign, created by some external influence, which undermined the reputation of different rights organizations. Many organizations went through inspections by different governmental agencies and that also disrupted their work and put additional pressure on the NGO community.

- Small number of professionally developed Civil Society organizations and their concentration in big cities;

There are challenges of different levels in the area of professional development of NGOs in Russia. One of them is that a significant wave of public activities of the 1990s disappeared, leaving a small number of organizations that are committed to continue their activities.

Their further professional development may be focused in the following areas:

1. Situation evaluation and strategy planning;
2. Developing and delivering messages especially within local communities and among governmental agencies;
3. Building support within local communities;
4. For the service providing (social rights NGOs) – empowerment-centered approach in service development;
5. Coalition building and networking (including cross-issue and strategic partnerships)
6. Relationship with governmental agencies – balance of cooperation and criticism;

- Weak understanding of gender equality and equity among both governmental authorities and non-governmental activists, as well as the general public

Women's rights are even less obvious for people in Russia, including governmental agencies and some NGOs. Lack of knowledge on women's human rights and a weak system

of response contributes to impunity for crimes committed against women. Our study has revealed widespread refusals to register women's complaints, as well as insensitivity and inaction on behalf of law enforcement agencies, which still view domestic and sexual violence as private matters, not criminal offences and women's human rights violations. According to ANNA statistics (2013), 60% of the women who called the National help line for women because of domestic violence never sought help from the police. Of those women who did, 76% were dissatisfied with police response. Where women were assertive in trying to file a complaint, the officers often delayed the filing process, or made it difficult. This results in underreporting, further minimization and invisibility of these crimes, and the reinforcement of the continuum of violations of women's human rights.



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“Russian NGOs: What Makes Us Stronger”

Russian NGOs: What Makes Us Stronger

The history of Russian civil society is quite short, it started its active development since the end of 1980s. Its institutional base consists of non-governmental organizations (NGOs). With a population of approximately 150 million people there are about 220 thousand registered NGOs. But less than half of those are actively working, meaning accomplishing their missions: such as providing social services, protecting rights of citizens, solving problems, exercising independent control, etc. Another important function, which is common to all NGOs regardless of what they do, is civil education and unification of people.

Specialists recognize that Russian civil society sector is not very powerful nor influential: the number of NGOs that can effect the development of the society is extremely small. But many organizations and informal civil groups have considerable potential to become active members of civil society, even though this potential can be realized only under certain favorable circumstances.

Current government policies in regard to civil society are ambiguous. On one hand, the state has paid attention to the sector and, starting from 2011, unprecedented measures of state support to socially-oriented NGOs are visible, including federal and regional programs, subsidies, informational and property support. The government also understands the need to support the development of infrastructure of NGOs, financing education and exchange of experience. Besides that, it works on expanding access of NGOs to the market of social services: new laws are being developed, and “roadmaps” are being created - there is considerable discussion and expert attention in this direction.

These positive trends are related to the process of “de-authorization” in the sphere of social services which is starting in Russia: the state recognizes the fact that by itself it cannot accomplish all promised social commitments and wants to give some of them to non-governmental institutions, including NGOs. This process is perceived positively by both NGOs and officials. At the same time both sides understand existing limitations. These include low “starting positions” of NGOs, weak financial and technical bases (which are necessary for providing high quality social services over extended periods of time), and public opinion about NGOs. These problems are weakening the competitiveness of NGOs and not allowing them to realize their potential even in the sphere where favorable conditions do exist.

Simultaneously, the authorities move in the opposite direction. Since the end of 2012 the law about “NGOs as foreign agents” has been implemented in the country. This law requires that organizations which receive foreign financing and engage in political activities have to register as a special organization. In the Russian language, “foreign agent” has a negative connotation and is related to concepts of betrayal and espionage. At the same time, the law doesn’t give a clear definition of political activity, and as practice shows, it is often treated as any interaction with authority or an impact on public opinion. Therefore, the majority of affected organizations, especially human rights and environmental ones, find themselves under the threat of persecution, or, at least, receiving extra attention from the authorities, additional checks or sometimes legal persecution. But many organizations refuse to register as foreign agents, protesting against the absurdity of this law. To date, there were checks in more than a thousand organizations because of this law. More than 20 legal cases were initiated. In cases when organizations were forced to register as foreign agents they preferred to stop operations. Legal cases still continue. Now the constitutionality of this law is being considered by the Constitutional Court.

Even though these efforts affected just a small percentage of the organizations, they really damaged the reputation of a whole sector. First of all, because the most active and well-known organizations suffered; and secondly, because there were negative reactions from authorities and media. But in those difficult circumstances, the manifestation of solidarity and consolidation of the sector could be observed, with organizations supporting those being persecuted.

The borders of the sector are not clearly defined: in addition to registered NGOs, new players have appeared. Already for 7-8 years there have been informal volunteer groups that are active in emergency situations, demonstrating huge potential of civil involvement. In addition to traditional NGOs, there are “competitors” such as state non-commercial organizations that are providing social services, pseudo-NGOs that are formed because of the opportunity to get state financing, and so forth. It is obvious that not all new players share the same values that are the foundation of democratic civil society, such as solidarity, activism, democracy. But it’s also obvious that between those new players it’s necessary to look for allies, search for common language and unite efforts.

This is already understood by leaders who are working at federal, regional and local levels. But for the majority of organizations, the main stakeholder, donor and partner is the state. They are connecting their future with the state. Their primary expectation of the state

is to ensure fair ‘rules of the game’ that will be understandable and designed for long term sustainability. Under these conditions, and if the process is clear and fair, the organizations will get favorable conditions for development and will be able to thrive. Under these conditions they will be able to easily find partners within businesses, NGOs and common people.

Until this time the importance of creating communication directly with citizens was underestimated. It is not a coincidence that few citizens participate in the work of NGOs and few sympathize with the sector. According to a Higher School of Economics study, 73% of the population are not involved in NGOs work. This can account for their lack of information about the nature of the sector and benefits it brings. These studies confirm that those few people who are involved in NGOs’ work (donors, volunteers, practitioners) are better “quality” citizens of their country. They show their social and political activity at different levels more often, feel a shared sense of responsibility for what’s happening, and most importantly they feel that they can influence today’s reality and they can improve it. Unfortunately, the majority of Russians do not get involved in public life.

One of the main reasons for social passivity is a feeling that a person cannot influence the current situation. There are statistics available about the dynamics of a sense of responsibility for what’s happening in the country, region, or at home which illustrates the situation well. From 2006 to 2011 a sense of responsibility was slowly growing at all levels: a change from 78% to 87% feel responsibility for their homes; a change from 52% to 72% feel responsibility for their cities; and from 33% to 60% feel responsibility for their country. In 2011, the number that shows the level of responsibility for cities and the country dropped (4% and 8% respectively) but the indicator of responsibility for one’s own home is still growing and in 2013 was 89%. People increasingly create their own initiatives, work together with neighbors for their realization, and quite often these efforts are successful. There is a chain reaction: from small activities to making decisions.

What is left for NGOs? They can and must get involved in this chain reaction, helping people to unite around important issues and thereby helping their activity to be more visible and appreciated by people. What can they enforce?

The further development of the non-commercial sector in Russia depends on internal and external factors. In the current situation, the external factors are least predictable. In case the situation around Ukraine will follow the worst case scenario, it is difficult to expect that the thriving conditions for NGOs’ development that exist now will be preserved. At the

same time, the negative factors which inhibit development will most probably only worsen. In such conditions with these external barriers and without strong internal force the sector will suffer.

If the current political crisis can be successfully overcome, and if there isn't sharp deterioration of internal political and economical situation in the country, then there will be a possibility of favorable development of civil sector. That will be possible with the following internal and external conditions

External conditions:

1. Preservation at the same level or expansion of state support of NGOs.
2. Maintenance, or increase, of involvement of NGOs in decision making at different levels (participation in work of public and boards of trustees, working groups of ministries, public chambers, etc.)
3. Further development of the recent trend of involving NGOs in work of social protection of people, education, health and culture.
4. Development of tax benefits to support charitable activity of citizens and corporations.
5. Decrease in repression of human rights and ecological NGOs that have foreign financing and prove to be "inconvenient" for authorities. For example, through cancellation of, or considerable changes to, the "law about foreign agents".
6. Termination of media persecution of NGOs that get foreign financing.
7. Termination or at least reduction of "over-regulating" of volunteering activities.

Internal conditions:

1. NGOs leverage the growing popularity of charitable and public activities of the population. Continue to involve citizens as volunteers, members, allies, donors and participants in their activities.
2. Increase self-organization of NGOs, through the creation of internal rules to govern their work, form unions and associations, and strive toward more openness and transparency.
3. Continue to increase their professionalism as suppliers of services for people, and compete, together with state and private organizations, for contracts as service suppliers.

4. Expand their relationships with informal civil activists.
5. Improve their abilities to raise funds from private and corporate sources.
6. Further develop the infrastructure of the non-commercial sector.

One of the most important assignments now is to show the value of NGOs, their contribution to the development of civil society, solidarity and improving quality of life of people. It could be done through the combined efforts of leaders of the non-commercial sector, and such efforts are being organized by several NGOs that feel some responsibility for the whole sector.

If the above mentioned conditions are actually realized, it is possible to expect a significant growth and stabilization of the non-commercial sector.



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“Dealing with Problems of the Russian Civil Society”

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Recent social trends

Citizens' initiatives are becoming more and more visible in Russia. Back in 2010, as one journalist once told me in private conversation, it was very hard to publish a story about activists and volunteers. Editors were not interested. Now such stories are rather frequent and popular with Russian media. Cases of defending Khimki forest, observing elections, and of volunteers helping victims of the floods become well known in Russia and abroad. Apart from well known cases there are hundreds of smaller initiatives all over the country.

Yet people ready to act and help others are still a minority of the population in Russia, even in big cities. According to the recent Levada-Center poll, less than 10% of Russians donate money to charitable institutions or civic initiatives (though at the same time about 30% give alms from time to time). A little bit more than 10% are united in different citizens' associations, school councils, cottage cooperatives, etc. Only about 2-3% work as volunteers. It seems from our data that women (rather than men), people with higher education (rather than without it), middle-aged (rather than very young or old) and well-off people (rather than poor) are more likely to help, donate, participate and take action. Thus it is possible to say that the autonomy of an individual, in no need of state support, is crucial for the development of the civic sphere.

Internet obviously also contributes to such independence. The internet audience in Russia is growing rapidly. Now about 60% of Russians are using internet regularly, and this figure nearly doubled in the last 3 years. Social networks are popular among 45-50% of Russians, and with younger Russians in big cities this figure reaches about 90%. So young people in big Russian cities are all potentially connected to each other through networks such as "Vkontakte" and "Odnoklassniki". Facebook is much less popular. Social networks are used more and more frequently by civic activists in Russia. As one of them told me in an interview, "I don't know whether there are a lot more active people in Russia now, but today it is much easier for us to find each other and to coordinate our work". Proliferation of the internet and social networks, alongside growing incomes in recent years, resulted in the expansion of various crowdfunding schemes, Navalny's Anti-Corruption Foundation and

Colta.ru being only the most vivid examples. With the spread of online databases and social networks, it is now possible to conduct serious anti-corruption investigations. There are several civic groups of this kind, as well as many individual civic journalists and bloggers operating all over the country and even from abroad.

It is possible to speak about the development of several major areas of civic activism in Russia. Many of them experienced an influx of participants and an increase of activities during the protest mobilization in big Russian cities, primarily in Moscow and St. Petersburg, in the end of 2011 – beginning of 2012. Environmentalists are among these activists. They are fighting for preservation of wildlife and parks in Sochi, Moscow, Kaliningrad, and elsewhere. Many organizations and informal groups are campaigning to preserve cultural heritage, or making the urban environment friendly for ordinary people, or adopting it for the use of people with disabilities. Quite a number of initiatives, again many of them outside of Moscow, emerge to deal with helping homeless people, searching for lost children, finding homes for stray animals, etc. In a noble impulse people came together in 2010 to fight devastating wildfires and in 2012 to help victims of the flood in Southern Russian town of Krymsk.

A number of activities were inspired by the last parliamentary elections and the following protests. There is an observer's' movement that at some point in 2012 united more than 25000 participants across the country. Again, most action took place in the capital, but there were also teams of observers working in several big cities of Yaroslavl, Astrakhan, and Ekaterinburg. The police violence during the mass protests in Moscow lead to creation of several new human rights groups, such as 6th May Committee, Rosuznik, and OVD-Info. They now monitor the arrests during the rallies, deliver legal support free of charge, raise money for it and campaign for release of political prisoners. Surprisingly, the December 2011 protests became an opportunity for the Russian LGBT-movement to organize their first gay-pride in the capital as a column inside a larger protest rally. And as the gay community came under severe pressure from the government, it became more active and vocal in defending LGBT rights in Russia, and achieved worldwide recognition of the problem.

Organizational problems

Despite the variety of topics (and problems) addressed by Russian civic groups and NGOs, many of them experience similar organizational problems. You may often be amazed that despite how smart, “business minded” and innovative the civic activists are, nevertheless it seems quite often that they are reinventing the bicycle. There can be a lack of managerial skills in old organizations as well as in the new ones. It is not uncommon that people are learning from scratch how to deal with media, dig for data, present their cause to the public, raise money, and campaign for change. The question is how to do it effectively. This issue is now given more thought within the civil society. I guess it partly because efficiency attracts supporters, and also because (as one activist in Perm told me) management is now on the university curriculum and managerial ideas are slowly adopted by the people. I guess some assistance in transferring these skills through trainings, meetings or long-term partnership between Russian organizations and initiatives and their Western counterparts can make a difference. Some Russian activists, primarily from big cities, already have connections with colleagues abroad, yet these are rather personal, inconsistent and sporadic contacts and experiences. But truth be told, achieving efficiency is not entirely in the hand of the organization itself. It also depends on the whether the government is ready to cooperate with the civic sphere or rather tries to block people’s initiatives.

Another challenge that Russian civic activists deal with is how to find balance between “hierarchical” and “network” (or in some sense “anarchical”) approaches towards their organization or group. Recently there was much disaffection with strong leadership both in politics and civic sphere. Growing influx of volunteers and new members in NGOs and civic organizations put pressure to make decision making processes more open, leadership more accountable, and initiatives more participatory. The question is how to introduce more internal democracy within organizations. Otherwise people won’t come and won’t help. At the same time, there is a concern, that without established hierarchy, planning, delegation of responsibilities, and control, it is hard to deliver efficiency (and thus again to be attractive to volunteers). This problem, as well as others, is often aggravated by the generational gap and misunderstandings, both within organizations and between old and newly established initiatives.

Strategic planning is a problem in itself. When speaking with Russian NGO and civic leaders you will seldom meet a person who plans over a year ahead. It is simple to say that there is no culture of planning in Russian NGOs, yet this situation is more or less determined by the circumstances. Usually there are no “long-term” investments in the Russian civic sphere. It is possible to get some funding on a project-to-project basis, but the number of available donors is shrinking. The socio-political environment, that of legal basis and attitudes of the state towards the civic sector, is constantly changing. For instance, many organizations had to suspend or entirely cancel their projects with international donors after the introduction of the new “Foreign Agent” NGO law in 2013. Furthermore, crowdfunding is legally risky for NGOs and is often not recommended by the lawyers. So this way of funding is commonly used by small and not formally registered initiatives. It is really hard to plan in advance when you are not sure that funds will be available or worry your organization will be closed next month.

Existential problems

The fund development for civic organizations in Russia is also an issue of securing independence and autonomy from the state. The fact is that most of the resources are controlled by the Russian state in one way or another. The funding from foreign donors has been decreasing since mid 2000-s, when the state took a rather hostile attitude towards overseas grants for NGOs. After Khodorkovsky’s imprisonment, big business became cautious of support of any activities that can be perceived as contradicting interests of those in power. Major Russian foundations, often related to big business, are cautious as well. Small and medium businesses are more favourable towards the activists, but still the majority of businessmen do not show much interest in charity. There was a major increase in governmental spending lately in the form of so called “presidential grants”, but the grant awarding process still remains highly politicized and opaque 8 years from the start. Interviews with NGO leaders conducted in 2010 highlighted “community foundations” as a successful form of supporting local activities, but I do not have any update on what is going on with them now. Crowdfunding is rather new in Russia, but already it is restricted by the new legislation. Thus the lack of independent funding creates a real challenge for civic organizations and initiatives that want to remain self-determined.

Actually there are only two modes of operation for civic initiatives in Russia. You either serve the government, or sooner or later you find yourself in opposition and under pressure. Parallel existence is possible only for small, young, and largely un-influential initiatives. One can observe how the slow growth of civic activities and determination of people to resist highhandedness and corruption is increasingly leading to conflict with the political system. As Vaclav Havel once put it, in an authoritarian system any civic activity, any autonomous and self-determined act becomes political and oppositional. You may remember that among the general public there is only a tiny percent of people that are ready to organize to help others, donate money, and work voluntarily. But among the participants of the protest rallies in Moscow, according to Levada-Center polls, such people prevailed.

This didn't go unnoticed by the Russian government and now the whole independent sphere in the country is under tough pressure from the state since the end of 2011. Alternative opinions are strongly discouraged. Influential independent media are being closed down, internet censorship is hardening and non-profit organizations are being checked by prosecutor's office and defamed by state-owned TV. The whole sphere is being discredited to deprive it of the support of the general public.

It is hard to make recommendations in such turbulent times, yet some suggestions could still be offered for the international community:

- It should be fully aware of the gravity of the situation in Russian civil society - the attention and moral support of the international community can be important in itself. Separation from the (so called) Western community could be devastating for Russian society.
- Support should come along the already existing trends, to vigorous and rapidly developing initiatives that have already demonstrated at least limited success and efficiency
- Could be the source of organizational skills, managerial and high-tech know how and experience, that can be useful for the civic sphere. Russian civil society should not keep reinventing the bicycle.

- Put emphasis on assisting organizational development of the civic sphere, as well as on human development of the activists
- Long-term partnership, rather than short-term, project-to-project interactions may encourage strategic planning within Russian NGOs and civic initiatives

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