

Underdeveloped Civil Society in Russia: Origin, development and differentiation of independent social organizations in the transforming Russia

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I. Introduction

The collapse of authoritarian regimes, particularly in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, has revived the idea of civil society. It is widely accepted that a vibrant civil society is a necessary, although not sufficient, precondition for democracy. Civic groups may contribute to democratic stability in two ways: internally, civic groups inspire habits of cooperation, solidarity, public-spiritedness, and trust; whereas externally, these networks aggregate interests and articulate demands to ensure the government's accountability to its citizens. It is this dense infrastructure of groups, some argue, that is the key to making democracy work.

Although there exists conceptual ambiguity and theoretical disaccord, what is now called civil society no longer includes the economy constituted on the basis of the private law and controlled by labor, capital and commodity markets. Rather, non-governmental and non-profit organizations, associations and movements based on spontaneity comprise the institutional core of civil society. Of course in a given society we can observe various types of non-governmental and non-profit social organizations and institutions, among them also those that could hardly be regarded as civil society actors. Then a question arises as to criteria that can help us distinguish between them.

First of all, we can analytically draw a distinction between two different types of social organizations: input-oriented (advocacy) and output-oriented (service). On the side of policy implementation, complex network structures of public administrations and private organizations, interest groups etc. have emerged and function in each policy field as locus of coordination or pork barrels. From such output-oriented social organizations there to be distinguished groups, associations and organizations that voice social problems, make political claims, articulate interests or needs, and influence legislative processes or policy making. The spectrum goes from associations with clearly defined group interests, political organizations and cultural institutions to public interest groups such as environmental or civil rights NGOs. Such input-oriented organizations alone may belong to the infrastructure of civil society.

Another criterion for differentiation relates to the way in which identity of a given organization is created. Some social actors can identify themselves by their origins in functional subsystems such as employer's federations, labor unions, leaseholders' protection organizations etc., which innately dispose of organizational powers, financial resources or threat potentials. In contrast, actors of civil society have to put forth their own identity features by themselves and rely mainly on spontaneous participations. Naturally, these actors may also be dependent on sponsors bringing in money, organizations, knowledge and social capital. But it is not necessarily the case that sponsors impair the autonomy and neutrality of their activity.

Thus civil society actors are organizations, associations and groups which have at least the characteristics of input-orientation and indigenous identity independent of social power. Interactions among themselves, with other social actors and the state determine structure and contents of civil society. How it might look like in a given society, however, is an empirical issue. Usually, civil society of a democratizing country has been analyzed in a conceptual framework extrapolating Western experiences of spontaneous development from below. But

different patterns of state-society relations have yielded different paths to and contents of civil society. For instance paths to and contents of civil societies in the late-industrializing countries, where state-led industrialization has imprinted its trace on social changes, were substantially different from those in the Western societies. In those cases the centrality of the state and the particularistic ethos of the society must be taken into account. In that sense, an emerging civil society of the post-communist Russia could only be understood in a broader context of the changing state-society relations. In particular, interactions between nascent civil society actors and the state on the one hand, and influences of the dominant social ethos characteristic of the transitional society on emerging civil society on the other hand have to become the central points of the civil society analysis.

This paper attempts to illuminate particular paths to, and distinctive structures and contents of civil society in Russia on the basis of an analysis of origin, differentiation and development of independent social movements during the post-communist transformation process. Differentiating political arena from the amalgamated Soviet system was one of the main tasks of the post-communist transformation. At the initial stage of transformation, independent social groups and movements (“informal groups”) mushroomed, which led people to believe in an emergence of civil society in Russia. However these informal groups disappeared quickly after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Drastic political changes from Soviet Union to the independent Russia and “war of pork barrels over state property under the name of marketization” had led, combined with Western aid for “building civil society”, to a structural shift in civil society weakening its developmental potentials. With regard to the social consequences of the mode of marketization and liberalization, Ha Yong-Chool has already pointed out their negative effects on the emerging civil society in Russia: corrupt and illegal social ethos resulted from the post-communist transformation would not provide a favorable environment for civil society. Western

assistance was also viewed to have somewhat paradoxical effects on the development of civil society: It has merely produced distinct civic elites without a visible constituency and horizontal networks among themselves. This paper tries to provide an alternative explanation for underdevelopment of civil society in Russia mainly focusing on interactions between civil society actors and the state during the transformation process.

II. Origin, development and differentiation of independent social organizations

With the drastic rise of informal groups since 1986 there started a segregation of political arena from the State, which had been identical of the whole system. The formation and characteristics of nascent civil society actors can be understood in a context of widespread and various “informal movements” which were a visible result of partial opening of the party-state system undertaken by General Secretary of CPSU, Michail Gorbachev. Informal groups from discussion clubs to dissident organizations were actually an integral part of the Soviet society and belonged to the so called “second society.” The main difference before and after 1986 laid in their quantitative expansion and qualitatively new character stemming from official sponsorship of the party and government institutions. The first informal political groups were above all sponsored by research institutes of the Academy of Sciences and mainly consisted of young humanistic intellectuals and journalists. Informal groups provided an open forum for discussions on themes earlier done in the “kitchen.” Organizational features of the first informal groups can be summarized as follows. First, typical informal groups were small in size and formed on the basis of personal acquaintances and friendship. Second, most of them were similar to a followers’ group organized around a charismatic leader. Leader created organization,

not vice versa. Thus it was also commonplace that leading figures belonged to several organizations at the same time. And lastly, the most important factor affecting organizational unity/disunity of informal groups was the relationship with authorities. The ideological differences among them were so fluid and ambiguous that they could not be a decisive factor in organizational division. Rather informal groups confronted an alternative: staying within official limits to receive material support and favorable media exposures or obtaining reputation as a clear-cut opposition to the regime.

The transfiguration of informal groups to social movement organizations happened in early 1988 when the reform policy of Gorbachev took a conservative turn. Informal groups renamed themselves as “parties” or “popular fronts” and went to the street. Such an organizational development surely exceeded permissible limits. However, unlike in the Baltic republics, all the experiments with building a popular front as a unified umbrella organization for democratic reform in Russia were in vain. The Russians lacked such a unifying factor as national independence attributive to the Baltic nations. What was more important for the development of social movements at that time was the participation of reform communists and liberal intellectuals from the Establishment. Owing to their biographical background they tended to be more moderate than young activists from the early informal movements. However, with the experience of “Memorial”- movement, which developed into an anti-system mass movement while dealing with the victims of Stalin’s Terror, the political and organizational gap between renowned liberal intellectuals of the Establishment and young activists of informal political groups became narrower. Thereby the Memorial-movement could play a role similar to the Baltic Popular Fronts in Russia. It further performed a function of electoral machine for the reform forces in 1989 when the first, relatively free elections for the half-democratic parliament

(“Congress of People’s Deputies”) were held. Along with Boris Yeltsin and prominent reform politicians many leading figures of the Memorial-movement could also be elected to people’s deputies.

The elections of the Congress of People’s Deputies in 1989 opened a new phase for independent social movements in Russia. As soon as the reform-oriented politicians entered the Congress and formed a democratic opposition faction (“Interregional Group”), they became the focal point of democratic reform forces in Russia. Programmatically, they overcame the ideology of “a genuine socialism” prevailing among activists of informal groups. They demanded political pluralism, decentralized federalism and mixed economic system. Their program had an enormous impact on political orientations of democratic associations, election blocs and movements. Organizationally, the Interregional Group played an important role in building a democratic bloc. Although the Group itself was not directly involved, members of the Group actively participated in various efforts to build a unified organization of democratic movements. However, the change of political agenda in early 1990 predetermined possible outcomes of such attempts. Before the 1990 sub-national parliament elections, the organizational efforts were concentrated on building a political party on the national level alternative to CPSU. But in the face of increasing secessionist tendencies on the sub-national level any attempt to build a unified organization on the national level was hardly achievable. Not the problems of democratization on the national level, rather power struggle between the central government of the Soviet Union and the sub-national entities (“Union Republics”) dominated the whole political processes. As a result, democratic forces shifted the focus of organizational efforts from the national level of the Union to the sub-national Union Republics, and created the “Democratic Russia” encompassing almost all informal political groups of democratic

orientations.

At the outset the Democratic Russia was formed as election-bloc for the parliament elections of 1990 in the RSFSR. Based on the political program of the Interregional Group, the Democratic Russia election-bloc staged a rather effective election campaign. In comparison with the elections on the national level, many young activists of informal groups won the elections and entered the “official” political arena. A few of them tried to create new political parties making use of their official status as people’s deputies. Such attempts were, of course, motivated by the elimination of the Article 6 from the Soviet Constitution on the Communist Party’s leading role. But newly created parties remained organizationally underdeveloped: they were no more than “proto-parties” satisfied with collective membership in an association of the democratic forces. Immediately after the impressive electoral victory of the democrats Yeltsin managed to take, although with a slim majority, the highest position of the Russian state. However, the changed political landscape of the “dual power” (the Union vs. the RSFSR) only aggravated the situation of the democratic forces. While united in the anti-CPSU stance, they were not in agreement with regards to the reform priority: political democratization or restoration of the Russian statehood. Also, reorganizing the Democratic Russia from the election-bloc into a tighter organization was accompanied by severe internal conflicts. A compromise was at last reached on the creation of a loose umbrella organization (the “Democratic Russia”-movement) with a collective leadership adapting the common anti-CPSU platform. The Democratic Russia movement, in the meantime, developed into a mighty organization with enormous mobilization power. It organized mass demonstrations in support of Yeltsin as *the* anti-CPSU symbol figure.

Yet the popularity of the Democratic Russia movement stemmed mainly from involvement of

popular opposition politicians. Not the organization, but Yeltsin himself was the hidden engine of popular mobilization. Considering lack of coherent program other than anti-CPSU and de facto dependence of the movement on a single individual, the split in the Democratic Russia movement was inevitable as the power struggle between Gorbachev and Yeltsin ended with the victory of the Russian president and consequently the common enemy disappeared. More than any other there were two important issues that divided the Democratic Russia movement since 1992: positions on the unexpected collapse of the Soviet Union and relations to the President Yeltsin who, by then, had launched the economic “shock therapy.” Whereas the issue regarding the fate of the Soviet Union had an effect of more conservative wing of the democratic movement breaking away, the problem of relations to the Yeltsin Administration devastated the spontaneous social movements. In order to mobilize social support for the unpopular neo-liberal reform policies, the Yeltsin Administration tried to initiate its own social movements from above. For that purpose the Administration exploited organizational resources of the Democratic Russia movement, providing regional subgroups – if supportive – with material and administrative assistance. Radical leaders of the Democratic Russia movement sharply criticized such attempts of the Administration to subordinate the movement to the government. But they had no other options but to leave or be expelled. As a result, a hybrid of social movements and governmental organizations (“Democratic Choice”) was created, which as a quasi-party would participate in the State Duma elections of 1993. The remaining segments of the Democratic Russia movement either disappeared from the public scene or became part of a democratic opposition party called “Yabloko.”

III. Conclusion

This paper traced origin, development and differentiation of independent social organizations in the transforming Russia. From informal political groups to the Democratic Russia movement the development of independent social organizations would have brought about a vibrant civil society. But the specific features of the relations between nascent civil society actors and the state made civil society in Russia underdeveloped. The civil society actors gained their influences mainly from negative, i.e. anti-CPSU campaigns. The support for Yeltsin under the condition of the “dual power” was the other side of the coin because he was considered by the population as *the* anti-CPSU symbol figure. Lack of coherent program other than anti-CPSU and de facto dependence of the movement on the President Yeltsin, the split in the Democratic Russia movement was inevitable as the common enemy disappeared after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Above all, the problem of relations to the Yeltsin Administration devastated the spontaneous social movements, as the “new democrats” in the Yeltsin Administration tried to initiate their own social movements from above. For that purpose they exploited organizational resources of the Democratic Russia movement, providing supportive regional subgroups with material and administrative assistance. Such attempts suffocated spontaneous social organizations and movements which had once flourished. Hence the domination of top-down practices in building social organizations (“parties of power”) and the underdevelopment of civil society in the transforming Russia.

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