

C

Civil Society and Social Capital in Russia



Lev Jakobson, Irina Mersianova and
Natalya Ivanova
HSE University, Moscow, Russia

of specific functions, including socialization, service, articulation, mobilization, control, and defense (Mersianova, 2018). Realization of these functions has varied in different periods of civil society development. In the past decade, the service function comes to the forefront (Jakobson & Mersianova, 2022; Mersianova, 2013).

Definition

Research on civil society in Russia is characterized by a variety of disciplinary and methodological approaches. Social scientists point out a substantive blur of the concept used in multiple ways (Jensen, 2006). Definitions of civil society suggested by Russian social scientists can be divided into several groups. Value-based definitions identify civil society as “democratic,” “pluralistic,” and “open.” Spatial definitions use metaphors of sphere or space conceptualizing civil society as a certain social and sociocultural space and stressing its independence from the state. Subject-based concepts define civil society through its actors: individuals, groups, and voluntary associations of citizens, the combination of which forms the institutional structure of the third sector (Mersianova, 2011). We understand civil society as a sphere of human activity outside of family, the state, and the market, which is created by individual and collective actions, norms, values, and social relations, to deliver a number

Introduction

Essentially, four distinct periods can be identified in the history of Russian civil society.

The Imperial Russia period dates back to the second half of the eighteenth century when associations promoting education, literature, art, and charitable activities started to emerge. Initiated by citizens, these associations were spurred by the local self-government instituted by Catherine the Great in 1785. The abolition of serfdom in 1861 witnessed a proliferation of groups focusing on art, theater, and music, mutual aid societies, and vocational, technical, and medical societies (Conroy, 2006; Jakobson et al., 2011). Available evidence suggests that “a tentative civil society was visible in Russia at least from the late eighteenth century, but civil society really burgeoned in the second half of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries” (Conroy, 2006: 11).

The second period embraces the Soviet time. The boom in associational activity in the last decades of Tsarist Russia was curbed after the socialist revolution of 1917. By the end of the

1930s, the Soviet regime had destroyed almost all independent organizations and replaced them with structures under party-state control. New mass movements such as the Soviet Committee for Peace, the Union of Atheists, and the Union of Women had an explicitly communist ideology (Buxton. & Konovalova, 2013).

The third period of civil society development relates to the time of the Soviet system's radical restructuring announced by Mikhail Gorbachev as "perestroika" in 1986. The restructuring allowed the founding of independent groups and voluntary associations which were a new phenomenon in the Soviet Union since they were established at citizens' initiative rather than directed by the Communist Party (Evans Jr., 2006).

The fourth, post-Soviet period started in the early 1990s and until now has provided evidence of civil society's remarkable institutional growth and maturing against a backdrop of varying and sometimes conflicting attitudes by different government levels and agencies at different times. Moreover, the Russian nonprofit sector in the early post-Soviet period was hardly monolithic as it included former Soviet "legacy" organizations, new citizen-led nonprofits and voluntary organizations often addressing pressing social needs, as well as organizations that were novel for Russia and established with foreign donor support.

The nonprofit sector of the early post-Soviet period (the 1990s) was characterized by an "import-dependent development model" as Western funders established a significant presence in the country. The role of the state was reduced to benevolent noninterference; state budgetary support for NGOs was insignificant (Jakobson & Sanovich, 2010). International donors acted as the key agents for supply of both resources and institutions as well as transfer of Western third-sector culture to Russia through training of activists (Jakobson et al. 2018). In the 2000s, the operational environment for foreign donors became increasingly difficult, and most foreign funders began to depart. A 2006 revision of the "Law on Noncommercial Organizations" imposed restrictions on Russian nonprofit organizations and required government approval for NGO foreign

funding. It was followed by the much-disputed Foreign Agents Law in 2012. As a result, the "import-dependent model" was replaced by a process of import substitution of NGO institutions and resources in Russia. Domestic sources took up the role of foreign ones in providing NGOs with funding (Jakobson & Sanovich, 2010).

Civil Society

The social origins theory identifies four distinct models of nonprofit regimes characterized by the extent of social welfare spending and the scale of the nonprofit sector (Salamon et al., 2015). According to a conclusion of some 10 years ago, Russian civil society fitted the statist model of civil society development, characterized by limited size, relatively low levels of volunteer participation, and a low level of government financial support (Mersianova et al., 2017). However, the past decade witnessed a considerable expansion of multifaceted government NGO support programs and a noticeable growth in the number of NGOs and volunteer participation. In 2019, over one third of adult Russians (38%), according to the data of a national survey conducted by the Center for Studies of Civil Society and the Nonprofit Sector, were engaged in some form of volunteering. These changes indicate a developmental shift in Russian civil society from a classical statist model, which is yet to be profoundly explored.

Researchers note a complicated nature of the relationship between the state and civil society in Russia, whereas analyses of Russian civil society often fail to grasp its complexity and tend toward either extreme optimism or extreme pessimism (Sundstrom & Henry, 2006). A common perception shared by Western analysts focuses on the weakness of Russian civil society and government restrictions on NGOs ignoring positive developments (Daucé, 2015). Seeking to provide a more balanced assessment of Russian civil society, Javeline and Lindeman-Komarova (2010:179) argue that positive civil society developments, such as government-financed grant competitions to support Russian NGO projects, counter the

widely publicized negative trend in Russia's democratic development. The first federal open competition came in 2006 and distributed the equivalent of US\$ 15 million to 600 Russian NGOs. In 2020, the total amount of funding competitively distributed to NGOs through the Presidential Grants Fund exceeded RUB 11 billion (approximately US\$ 153.1 million).

Javeline and Lindeman-Komarova point to the bias of many Western media reports noting that legal requirements for NGO financial reporting in Russia have always been onerous, and surveys carried out in 2007 indicated that the NGO Law of 2006 was no more burdensome for human rights and advocacy groups than for other NGOs. As a result, four out of five NGOs in 2007 did not supply reports in the required format by the official deadline – which left them vulnerable to involuntary liquidation. A survey of NGO leaders in the same year asked them to name the main sources of pressure on their organization. “Not enough money, material resources” topped the list with 59.1%, while government pressure came very low at 2.9% (Ibid.: 174).

The CIVICUS Civil Society Index Project report points out that the creation of the Public Chamber of the Russian Federation, the introduction of state grants for NGOs, and the inclusion of well-known human rights activists in the Presidential Council for Civil Society and Human Rights manifest the state's contradictory attitude toward civil society driven by the desire to harness the resources of civil society to help solve Russia's social problems and by the aspiration to continue building a democratic state (Jakobson et al., 2011:17).

Salamon and Benevolenski (2021) point to the duality of Russian government policy, particularly regarding NGOs and recognize the existence of two rather divergent streams of policy toward NGOs at the same time. Despite a widely publicized perception of an overall hostility to NGOs, the Russian policy agenda featured a large-scale program of state support for NGOs aimed at introducing a pattern of government-nonprofit cooperation in the provision of social welfare services widespread in Western Europe and the United States. To date, there is a broad spectrum of

types of financial and non-financial support for NPOs (including informational, consulting, and educational support). This includes subsidies for NPOs, competitive allocation of grants, tax privileges, as well as property transfers to NPOs (*gratis* or on favorable terms of lease).

A new category, socially oriented nonprofit organizations (SONPOs), was introduced by law in 2010 with a broad range of purposes roughly compatible to charitable status in the United States (Benevolenski & Toepler, 2017). This category of nonprofits was eligible to receive tax and budgetary benefits and additional government support, the so-called tool kit including newly created regional SONPO programs, access to free or reduced-cost premises, information, technical assistance, and training to help SONPOs access government resources. Beyond the federal ministries, the number of regional administrations financing NPO support programs jumped from 7 in 2010 to 71 (out of 85) as of 2014 (Benevolenski, 2021). The SONPO Register included some 146,000 organizations in 2019, mostly active in education, culture, healthcare, sports, and youth development, with an average of 4 to 7 employees. In 2019, 74 regional administrations provided SONPOs with the financial support totaling 48.7 billion rubles (over \$750 million); 157 resource centers in 55 Russian Federation components received support from the federal and regional budgets (Ministry of Economic Development, 2020). Thus, a sizable infrastructure emerged to implement the new government policy of NGO support. This alternative domestic reality seems to be missing from the predominant external narrative focusing on the adversarial character of Russian government-NGO relations (Benevolenski, 2021; Salamon et al., 2015).

Mersianova (2018) concludes that civil society in Russia is influenced by a broad array of ideological, educational, legal, political, and economic factors. Among other things, the ideological factor manifests itself in the disposition of the population vis-à-vis participation in civil society: half of Russians are apparently prepared to unite with other people for collective action, if their ideas and interests coincide. Educational needs of

Russian NGOs are met by both the direct training and retraining of NPO cadres and the more general system of civic education that provides the knowledge and skills enabling citizens to participate in civil society institutions, organize to solve local problems, and provide public oversight of state service. Increasing the qualifications among NPO cadres is a key area of governmental support at the regional level. The legal factor refers to the juridical conditions surrounding the activities of civil society institutions. From 2005, there was a shift from state neglect, selective support for a limited number of organizations, and suspicion of NPOs receiving foreign funding, toward a certain revitalization of constructive interaction between government and NPOs. This was most notable in the creation of the Russian Federation Public Chamber (2005) and its analogues in the regions, the revision of the NPO legislation to remove certain restrictions, and also the inclusion of noted human rights defenders in the Presidential Council for Civil Society and Human Rights.

Social Capital

Social capital characterizes the society's capacity for self-organization and collective action in pursuit of some common good. The main ingredients of social capital are trust, social norms, values, and networks. Academic literature on social capital in Russia illustrates contradictions similar to those found in the debate on Russian civil society.

While Eberstadt (2010) finds a "negative" confirmation of social capital's significance for the country's social and economic outcomes, Menyashev and Polishchuk (2011) provide empirical data showing that social capital does have substantial economic payoff in Russia and conclude that Russia can rely on its social capital as a development resource. Contrary to serious doubts raised about the quantity and quality of social capital in Russia perceived as dominated by "anti-modern" bonding forms of social capital (Rose, 1998), other studies demonstrate that stocks of social capital significantly vary from one city or town to another and there are more and less "civic" cities. Bridging social capital was

found to advance local development, which attests to its value as a development resource. In today's Russia modern and anti-modern types of social capital coexist in a mix that can evolve over time (Menashev & Polishchuk, 2011).

Empirical Data

Civil Society

According to the Ministry of Justice, there were over 219,000 registered NGOs in Russia at the beginning of 2019. The status of SONPOs eligible for additional government support proceeds from their legal form, which excludes public corporations and political parties, and operation in at least one of the social activities listed in the organization's charter.

According to the national NGO Survey, 72% of NGOs operate in the social domain, including social services (32%), culture (24%), education (19%), sports (18%), and healthcare (10%), which reflects the current prevalence of the service function among civil society's multiple roles (Jakobson & Mersianova, 2022). According to the same survey, a lack of funding was the most critical issue confronting NGOs: a vast majority of NGO directors believe that the available sources of funds (62%) and funding amounts (63%) are inadequate to continue operations (Jakobson et al., 2020).

Volunteerism as an inherent part of the civic space is prevalent in its informal mode in Russia: approximately two thirds of Russian volunteers are engaged in altruistic activities on their own or with a group of friends rather than through any nonprofits. In recent years, the development of volunteerism infrastructure and the culture of volunteerism have been of special importance in the development of government NGO support policies. Government support is provided through resource organizations and networks such as the Association of Volunteering Centers, Victory Volunteers, and Medical Volunteers. Public awareness and appreciation of volunteers grew exponentially at the time of the COVID-19 pandemic. During self-isolation, 61% of Russians expressed their readiness to help people

isolated in their homes by monetary and non-monetary donations and provide other types of needed help. To a question about where they would turn for help during self-isolation, if needed, every fifth respondent said she/he would ask volunteers. Interestingly, the majority of respondents (70%) were confident that the society was positive toward socially active people, whereas over half of the respondents (59%) believed that being a socially active person in Russia is difficult (Mersianova & Ivanova, 2021).

Social Capital

One of the most commonly used measures of social capital is the level of trust: interpersonal, generalized, and institutional. According to the surveys conducted by the Center for Studies of Civil Society and the Nonprofit Sector at the Higher School of Economics in Moscow as part of its annual civil society monitoring, the share of Russians considering that other people in general can be trusted remained stable over more than a decade of observation (17–18%), with a gradual growth to 28% after 2014. Key demographic factors affecting generalized trust are education and family well-being. Distrust is more often expressed by people with an undergraduate degree and low-income and blue-collar workers. The level of trust at the close social distance (among people directly surrounding the respondent) is more than two times higher than the level of cautious attitude: 67% vs 31%. A 2017 survey revealed that almost three fourths (76%) of those polled are willing to join others for actions of common interest, whereas approximately one fifth of respondents are not prepared to do so. Since 2017, there has been no change in the data, which implies that the level of readiness to consociate among Russians has been fairly high and remained stable. Youth (18–24 years), residents of small towns (with the population under 50,000), those with a personal income under RUB 6000 and over RUB 30,000, technicians, and education workers are more prone to join others. Thus, not only high-resource groups but also populations with relatively low material and social resources are disposed toward collective action. Those who volunteer and make donations

and those who have a more positive outlook more often declare their willingness to join other citizens. A comparison of 2017 and 2019 survey data shows a certain decline in generalized trust (from 28% in 2017 to 23% in 2019). The share of those who believed in the prevalence of trust among people dropped from 48 to 34%. However, a surge in volunteering and helping behavior in crises periods, such as the 2010 unprecedented forest fires and the outbreak of COVID-19, brings to light a mobilizing role of Russian civil society and indicates that social capital manifests differently in normal and mobilizing circumstances (Jakobson & Mersianova, 2022).

Concluding Assessment

The complexity of government-nonprofit sector relationship in Russia, with its divergent policy directions, has not been reflected in international academic debate, which largely remains what can be described as one-sided, unheeding of potentially positive civil society developments. As Salamon and Benevolenski put it (Benevolenski, 2021: 229), “it may alert us to the possibility that the cooperative stream, despite being almost invisible in both press and academic accounts in the West, may ultimately prove to be at least as significant for the long-run future of the nonprofit sector in this country as the one that has attracted most of the attention externally.” Also, a more comprehensive picture of Russian civil society needs to take into account local patterns of government-NGO relations as well as different local levels of civic participation and activism across the vast Russian territory.

Cross-References

- ▶ [Civil Society, History of the Concept](#)
- ▶ [Civil Society and Authoritarianism](#)
- ▶ [Government-Nonprofit Sector Relations](#)
- ▶ [Philanthropy in Russia and Central Asia](#)
- ▶ [Social Capital, Definition of](#)
- ▶ [Social Origins Theory](#)
- ▶ [Volunteering in Russia and Central Asia](#)

References

- Benevolenski, V. B., & Toepler, S. (2017). Modernizing social service delivery in Russia: Evolving government support for non-profit organisations. *Development in Practice*, 27, 64–76.
- Buxton, C., & Konovalova, E. (2013). Russian civil society: History, today and future prospects. *INTRAC briefing paper*, 37. <https://www.intrac.org/resources/briefing-paper-37-russian-civil-society-history-today-future-prospects/>.
- Conroy, M. S. (2006). Civil society in late Imperial Russia. In A. B. Evans Jr., L. A. Henry, & L. M. Sundstrom (Eds.), *Russian civil society: A critical assessment* (pp. 11–27). Armonk: M.E. Sharpe.
- Daucé, F. (2015). The duality of coercion in Russia: cracking down on ‘foreign agents’ Demokratizatsiya: The Journal of Post-Soviet Democratization, 23(1), 57–75.
- Eberstadt, N. (2010). Russia’s peacetime demographic crisis: Dimensions, causes, implications. *NBR Project Report*. <https://www.nbr.org/publication/russias-peacetime-demographic-crisis-dimensions-causes-implications/>. Accessed 10 March 2021.
- Evans, A. B., Jr. (2006). Civil society in the Soviet Union? In A. B. Evans Jr., L. A. Henry, & L. M. Sundstrom (Eds.), *Russian civil society: A critical assessment* (pp. 28–54). Armonk: M.E. Sharpe.
- Jakobson, L., & Mersianova, I. (2022). Transformation of CSO functions in modern Russia. In *Charting Global Challenges: Civil Society, the Nonprofit Sector, and Culture*. Essays in Honor of Helmut K. Anheier.
- Jakobson, L., Mersianova, I., & Ivanova, N. (2020). Management context: Russia and the FSU. In H. K. Anheier & S. Toepler (Eds.), *The Routledge companion to non-profit management*, 1 (pp. 60–73). Routledge.
- Jakobson, L. I., Mersianova, I. V., Kononykhina, O. N., Benevolenski, V. D., Pamfilova, E. A., Proskuryakova, L. I., & Tumanova, A. S. (2011). *Civil society in modernizing Russia: Analytical report prepared by the Centre for Studies of Civil Society and the Non-Profit Sector of the National Research University “Higher School of Economics*. Moscow: NRU HSE: https://www.google.com/search?q=Civil+Society+in+Modernising+Russia%3A&rlz=1C1CHBD_enRU940RU940&oq=Civil+Society+in+Modernising+Russia%3A&aqs=chrome..69i57j33i22i29i30i5.3078j0j7&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8. Accessed 25 February 2021.
- Jakobson, L. I., & Sanovich, S. V. (2010). The changing models of the Russian third sector: Import substitution phase. *Journal of Civil Society*, 6(3), 279–300.
- Jakobson, L. I., Toepler, S., & Mersianova, I. V. (2018). Foundations in Russia: Evolving approaches to philanthropy. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 62(13), 1844–1868. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002764218778089>. journals.sagepub.com/home/abs.
- Jensen, M. N. (2006). Concepts and conceptions of civil society. *Journal of Civil Society*, 2(1), 39–56. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17448680600730934>. Accessed 18 January 2021.
- Menyashev, R., & Polishchuk, L. (2011). Does social capital pay off in Russia? *Working paper 10/2011/01, series WP10*. Moscow: Publishing House of the Higher School of Economics. https://wp.hse.ru/data/2011/03/22/1211146058/WP10_2011_01f.pdf. Accessed 1 March 2021.
- Mersianova, I. V. (2011). Definition of “civil society”: A case of systematization. *Civil Society in Russia and Abroad*, 4, 2–6. (in Russian).
- Mersianova, I. V. (2013). Trust and mistrust in civil society. In A. B. Kupreichenko & I. V. Mersianova (Eds.), *Trust and mistrust in the context of civil society development* (pp. 170–197). Moscow: National Research University Higher School of Economics Publishers. (in Russian).
- Mersianova, I. V. (2018). Russian civil society, Ch. 11. In *Russia: strategy, policy and administration*. 1 (pp. 113–119). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Mersianova, I. V., & Ivanova, N. V. (2021). *Is it difficult or easy to be an engaged citizen during the pandemic outbreak?* Monitoring of Public Opinion: Economic and Social Transformations.
- Mersianova, I., Kononykhina, O., Sokolowski, S. W., & Salamon, L. M. (2017). Russia: A classic statist model. In L. M. Salamon, S. W. Sokolowski, & M. A. Haddock (Eds.), *Explaining civil society development: A social origins approach* (pp. 223–236). Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Ministry of Economic Development. (2020). Report on the activities and development of socially oriented non-governmental organizations. https://www.economy.gov.ru/material/dokumenty/doklad_o_deyatelnosti_i_razvitiy_sotsialno_orientirovannyh_nekommercheskih_organizatsiy.html (in Russian).
- Rose, R. (1998). Getting things done in an anti-modern society: Social capital networks in Russia. In *Social capital initiative, working paper 6*. World Bank. https://web.worldbank.org/archive/website00522/WEB/PDF/SCI_W-21.PDF. Accessed 10 March 2021.
- Salamon, L. M., Benevolenski, V., & Jakobson, L. (2015). Penetrating the dual realities of government-nonprofit relations. *Voluntas: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations*, 26(6), 2155–2177. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11266-015-9652-5>. Accessed 10 March 2021.
- Salamon, L. M., & Benevolenski V. (2021). Putting NPOs on the policy agenda of post-soviet Russia: A story of convergence. *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, 50 (1), 213–234.
- Sundstrom, L. M., & Henry, L. A. (2006). Russian civil society. Tensions and trajectories. In A. B. Evans Jr., L. A. Henry, & L. M. Sundstrom (Eds.), *Russian civil society: A critical assessment* (pp. 305–322). Armonk: M.E. Sharpe.