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**GRASSROOTS
MOVEMENTS IN PUTIN'S
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A RAY OF HOPE FOR CIVIL SOCIETY?**

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Grassroots Movements in Putin's Russia:

A Ray of Hope for Civil Society?

Dr. Elena Chebankova

INTRODUCTION

Debates on civil society in Russia often boil down to the questions of which groups can be included in this category, which objectives these groups' participants pursue, and the nature of their relationship with the state. This naturally begs the question, what do we mean by the idea of civil society in general? Are these organisations aiming to dismantle or merely improve the existing socio-political order? Can we cast organisations that receive state funding within the civil society category or should we just consider movements that use non-government sources? Does civil society comprise of mass social mobilisation movements only? Would we include individuals who gather to defend a self-seeking single case or discuss current economic, political, or societal subjects within civil society or within the public sphere? Much of political theory (Habermas 1989; Habermas 1981; Giddens 1991; Keane 1988; Cohen and Arato 1992; Edwards 2009; Crossley and Roberts 2004; Ehrenberg 1999) claims that all of the above outlets can fall under the rubric of civil society. They must be bound, however, by a deeply held desire to improve public life and to achieve some tangible form of 'public good' (Edwards 2009).

Given the breadth of the concept, as well as the types of activity that could fall into this category, civil society may express different views, pursue different objectives and be influenced by different parties and factors. Hence, we may distinguish organisations that (1) have close links to the state and state-dominated institutions; (2) have links to global civil society through foreign funding procured from global business and foreign states; (3) grassroots organisations that do not have particularly close links to either of the above parties. The nature of the third, grassroots segment of civil society in contemporary Russia, will be the matter of interest to this essay.

THEORETICAL REMARKS

Reflecting on the particularities of the evolution of the grassroots civil society sector, we may suggest that it is impossible to disassociate its development from the country's political culture. The latter determines an essential set of values, beliefs, and patterns of political and socio-economic behaviour in each given society, as well as an essential toolset of reactive instruments to particular situations and challenges of the time (Almond and Verba 1963; Alexander 2000; Swidler 1986). Political philosophy substantiates this suggestion. Indeed, each theory of civil society implies that civil society is endogenous to grassroots level of community and culture.

The pre-Hegelian, or Lockean intellectual tradition, claims that civil society represents the highest moment of civilising a community that moves to organise its socio-economic relationships in institutional forms of self-regulation (Keane 1988, pp. 35-9; Seligman 1992, p. 22). The Scottish Enlightenment School defends a similar thesis within the economic segment of social functioning also seeing its origins at the grassroots economic family level (Keane 1988; Pelczynski 1984; Ehrenberg 1999). The Hegelian model of civil society lodges this institution partly within the family and partly within the state, thus assuming its rootedness within the local community (Keane 1988, pp. 52–53; Pelczynski 1984, p. 11; Cohen and Arato 1992, pp. 91–102). Finally, the Marxian model, insists that civil society ripens within the dominated classes and aims to uproot the existing order with a variable set of methods and instruments (Bobbio 1988).

In each model we speak about networks, organisations, and movements that grow from within the depth of people's consciousness. On this basis, we may infer that each state would have its own pattern of civil society, contingent on the nature and essence of its political culture. Hence, whenever we look at social movements and outlets of civic activity, in particular those operating at grassroots levels and those that do not receive funding from the state or foreign agents, we have to investigate the social climate prevalent in the country, as well as the deeply held values and aspirations shared by the majority of the population.

THE NEW RUSSIAN PATRIOTISM

Reflecting on contemporary Russia, political extremes of the 1990s led the country to

experience a collapse of her previously stable state and economic structures as well as the obliteration of her pre-existing identities and values. Loss of civic responsibility, decline in social solidarity, the emergence of a kaleidoscopic quilt blanket of norms, values, and ideas, lack of interpersonal and institutional trust challenged the majority of Russians in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union.¹ This contrasted with economic revival, rising living standards, and the consolidation of Russia's positions in the international arena during the decade of 2000s. The new political climate of the 2000s triggered a paradigm shift and launched a qualitatively new conservative and state-centred dynamic.² This was seen in the public desire to move towards the political centre and the need to gain distance from the political and socio-economic radicalism of the right, left or liberal nature.³

Opinion poll agencies clearly register this public mood. Recent polls conducted by the Levada Center, Russia's leading liberal opinion poll agency, indicate that the vast majority of Russians would not want to leave the country. Only 11 per cent of the 2015 poll respondents claimed that they would like to leave, while 81 per cent insisted that they prefer to live and work in Russia.⁴ This contrasts dramatically with the feelings of previous decades when large numbers of Russians wanted to settle in the West, which was reflected in significant waves of migration among Russia's professionals, scientists, and business persons. A large number of Russian students attending prestigious universities, such as Moscow State University, the Moscow Institute for International Relations, and the Moscow Higher School of Economics, believe that, by 2030, Russia will be one of the leading

¹ 'Kak zhivesh, Rossiya?' The Moscow Institute for Socio-political Research RAN, November 2001, available at www.ispr.ru/SOCOPROS/socopros300.html, last accessed 27 October 2015.

² 'Sotsiolog Karin Clement o Novom Rossiiskom Patriotizme: Liudi Pochuvstvovali Gordost za Svoyu Stranu,' RFI, 21 October 2014, available at <http://ru.rfi.fr/rossiya/20141020-sotsiolog-karin-kleman-o-novom-rossiiskom-patriotizme-lyudi-pochuvstvovali-gordost->, last accessed 21 November 2015.

³ 'Formirovanie srednego klassa v Rossii,' *wciom.ru*, 22 August 2008, available at wciom.ru/tematicheskii-arkhiv/item/single/10562.htm/?no-cache=1&cHash=eol0491f38, last accessed 27 October 2015; Maleva, T. and Ovcharova, L., 'Srednie klassy v Rossii i ikh okruzhenie na etape ekonomicheskogo rosta,' Independent Institute of Social Policy, published in *Demoscope Weekly*, 15-30 June 2009.

⁴ 'Opros: Rossiyane ne Khotyat Zhit I Rabotat na Zapade,' *gazeta.ru*, 14 October 2015, available at http://www.gazeta.ru/lifestyle/news/2015/10/14/n_7771109.shtml, last accessed 22 October 2015.

countries in the world.⁵ It is not our task to give a normative assessment to this phenomenon. Yet, at the time of writing (autumn 2015), the Russian public experienced a feeling of dignity for living in a once again strong and sovereign country.

These factors create an atmosphere of civic optimism and trust, which could, according to political theory studies, form foundations for viable civic activity in the future (Uslaner 2002, p. 97; Uslaner 1999; Putnam 1993; Newton 1999, p. 185; Coleman 1990, p. 320). It is true that such trust and optimism may fuel movements of a different nature including unsavoury nationalistic ones. At the same time, we can suppose that there must be scope for genuine democratic networks that could transform the picture of civic life in Russia. At the moment, such movements could develop in three possible directions. The first group of movements is geared towards practical, local, single-issues. The second category is focused on Russia's social issues and state welfare policies on a nationwide scale. The third group of movements is concerned with political matters and is mainly supportive of Russia's geopolitical objectives. Many such foreign policy movements are rather nationalistic albeit in a civic or civilizational, rather than ethnic, dimension. In what follows I will discuss each segment in detail.

SINGLE CASE MOVEMENTS

Single case associations are concerned primarily with one particular issue relevant to a particular community. They do not task themselves with wider political matters and usually dissolve upon the achievement (or otherwise) of desirable results. These are contrasted with policy-bound movements, which on the other hand, focus on broad ideological themes and campaign for a wide range of issues within a given policy area. They usually function on a cross-regional network principle. Such movements strive to change the modus operandi of differing political structures responsible for multifarious societal problems. A similar classification is made between local and national movements. While the former focus on narrow problems of a particular locality, the latter stand for wider policy oriented national matters (Rootes 1999; Dobson and Bell 2006; Dean 2001; Gabrielson 2008).

Commentators in Russia widely perceive single case movements as inferior to their nationwide policy-bound counterparts. In this light, Russian grassroots civil society is often blamed for being represented by local networks, lacking a nation-wide political dimension

⁵ 'My Uzhe Nachinaem Vozvyshatsia i My Vozvysimsya Okonchatelno,' *gazeta.ru*, 12 October 2015, available at http://www.gazeta.ru/comments/2015/10/09_a_7812347.shtml, last accessed 22 October 2015.

(Levashev 2006, Clement, Gontmakher, Klimov 2008, Mirasova 2008; MIS RAN 2010; Clement 2006). Similar to their Western counterparts, Russia's single case movements usually focus on local issues, such as the preservation of the local environment, resisting building and communication projects in particular localities, and tackling corruption at the municipal level. Yet, having originated in local areas with specific problems, some movements begin to co-operate with nation-wide networks concerned with similar issues and go beyond their initial narrowly targeted scope. Of particular importance are ecological movements related to preservation of local parks, forests, and cities' green zones. Campaigning against various forms of construction that could impede the quality of the local environment has become commonplace. In many cases, these movements unite with nation-wide and even international ecological networks. In some cases they co-operate with regional and federal authorities in an attempt to seek justice against municipal authorities.

The Moscow Region is the most recent example of the latter case. A number of local (city, town, and village) authorities deployed corrupt schemes involving the classification of local forests as shrubbery zones and subsequently selling them to big business for building and construction. Residents of nearby villages were painfully aware of this corrupt scheme and united in small village defence groups with the view to preserve their green zones and achieve justice. This led the newly elected governor of the Moscow region, Andrey Volorbyev, to respond by ordering random inspections of various local authorities and opening a specific hotline, which compiled evidence of land theft and deforestation. We cannot claim that the initiative managed to resolve the problem once and for all, given that such corruption schemes keep attracting media attention.⁶ Yet, public attention helped saving some local forests and fields as well as somewhat restraining mass corruption in this sphere.

On a general note, single-issue forms of activity are not idiosyncratic to Russia and cannot be held against Russia's civic movements tasked with self-seeking particularistic goals. Movements that focus on single-issues and local activity defending particular, rather than universal, problems usually represent a norm of political activity in the late modern and post-modern eras. Indeed, those paradigms see a significant change from the politics of *mass emancipation* – characteristic of the early modern and modern eras – towards politics of *self-actualization* that are focused on the resolution of professional, life-style, gender and environmental matters (Giddens 1991). Many authors argue that, in advanced post-

⁶ Alexei Pushkov, *PostScriptum*, 24 October 2015, available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4TCqEvZJSdA>.

industrial societies, civic movements 'emerge only in limited areas, for limited phases, and by means of moments of mobilisation' (Melucci 1998, p. 248; see also Lane 1974, pp. 175-8; Schwartz 1973; Sloam 2007). Moreover, it is usually claimed that the change in such societies does not occur on a large scale, but rather takes place subtly in the 'invisible realm of social consciousness' (Havel 1989, p. 397). This gives us hope that the accumulation of single-issue civic activity in Russia could change the picture of socio-political and state-society relations in general.

CIVIC ACTIONS WHICH CONCERN THE WELFARE STATE

Welfare state grounded civic activity has been on the rise since 2005 when the decision to monetise state benefits launched a significant wave of social protests. Grassroots civic movements, focused on various welfare problems, have been successfully operating across Russia since that time and their number multiplied and the scope of activity broadened. The activity of this segment corresponds with pre-existing values and expectations that have been deeply rooted in the Soviet political culture. Then the state took responsibility for the wellbeing of its subjects and had an overly inflated apparatus for free education, healthcare, recreation facilities, as well as accommodation and retirement programmes. From that point of view, Russian people find it easy to unite around welfare state causes and demand some restoration of pre-existing state obligations.

Movements and rallies with social demands have become quite common in Russia. Workers' movements are of particular importance. Workers of different occupations unite into nation-wide professional trade union networks independent from the state and from the state-run Federation of Russia's Independent Trade Unions (FNPR) that tends to side with employers and big business in the resolution of conflicts. Many such independent professional associations have been burgeoning across Russia throughout the decade of 2000s, and in some cases local authorities sided with those associations in defence of workers' rights.⁷ Of particular significance are Teachers Associations, as well as associations

⁷ One recent example of such co-operation took place in the Timashevo poultry factory in the Rostov region. The local prosecution office supported the factory workers demands and closely cooperated with Inter-regional Working Association (*Mezhregionalnaya Rabochaya Assotsiatsiya*) representing those workers interests. See 'Timashevskaya Ptitsefabrika: Stanet li Investor Otvetstvennym Rabotodatelem?' *Website of the all-Russian Union of Catering and Agricultural Sector Workers*, 12 August 2015, available at <http://www.iuf.ru/1/1744.html>, last accessed 26 October 2015.

related to agricultural, catering, automobile, logistic, and furniture manufacturing sectors.

Strikes are an interesting theme in this context. Most workers strike in demand of a fairer approach to their labour rights. Many recent strikes and protests saw employees claiming more comprehensive retirement packages, improvements of rules and regulations related to annual leave, a transparent approach to repayment of overtime hours, and improved legal protection of the right of workers to campaign for their demands.⁸ This contrasts with previous demands related to the mere repayment of wages, which took place during the 1990s, as well as the demands of the early 2000s that have been related to salary increases (Kozina 2009, pp. 19-20).

Pensioners and other categories of vulnerable and welfare state dependent citizens campaigned for their rights at the regional level, where local authorities failed to fulfil their social obligations or adopted measures that have been adverse to the interests of those citizens. July 2015 saw the Moscow region's pensioners campaigning against the decision of the Moscow city government to abolish free travel in Moscow for the region's residents.⁹ In a number of cities in the Northern Arkhangelsk region, parents campaigned against the decision of local authorities to reduce child benefits and against the decision of some authorities to abolish housing benefits for those who had work merit awards in the state sector.¹⁰ Similar decisions by the authorities of the Rostov region led to a long period of regional political instability with activists demanding the resignation of the government of the Russian Federation.¹¹

At the same time, I must mention that left-wing oriented observers should not feel overly optimistic. The general climate of political conservatism in Russia plays a significant role (Clement et al. 2010). Apart from the fact that welfare and social protection movements often obtain a conservative angle such as the one pursued by the pro-family *All-Russian*

⁸ 'Pedagogi Vyshli na Piket k Minobrnauki nakanune Dnia Uchitelia,' *Institut Kollektivnogo Deistviya*, 2 October 2015, available at <http://ikd.ru/node/19501>, last accessed 24 October 2015.

⁹ 'Zhiteli Podmoskovya Provodyat Mitingi Protiv Otmeny Lgot Pensioneram,' *regnum.ru*, 22 July 2015, available at <http://regnum.ru/news/society/1945166.html>, last accessed 24 October 2015.

¹⁰ 'Zhiteli Arkhangelskoi Oblasti Boryutsia za Sokhranenie Sotsialnykh Lgot i Detskikh Posobii,' *Institut Kollektivnogo Deistviya*, 19 November 2013, available at <http://ikd.ru/node/19274>, last accessed 24 October 2015.

¹¹ 'Zhiteli Zverevo k Svoim Trebovaniyam Dobavili Trebovanie Otstavki Pravitelstva,' *Institut Kollektivnogo Deistviya*, 6 August 2013, available at <http://ikd.ru/node/19182>, last accessed 24 October 2015.

Parents Resistance movement,¹² most Russians are not prepared to convert their social demands into political statements and, by doing so, change the nature of the extant political regime. They are reluctant to support persons and organisations whose goal is to overthrow Vladimir Putin, seize power on the back of social slogans, and ultimately pursue a neo-liberal agenda similar to the one implemented during the 1990s.¹³ Hence, participation in campaigns defending social welfare is, at times, slowed down due to the fact that most Russian neo-liberals began appropriating the social welfare agenda with the view of converting its cause to specific regime-changing objectives.¹⁴

CIVIC ACTION WITH FOREIGN POLICY AIMS

Following the onset of the Ukrainian 2014 *Maidan* crisis, many ordinary Russians, as well as political and foreign policy movements campaigned in support of the ethnic Russian population in Eastern Ukraine and Crimea. They hoped to defend the ability of those people to freely use their language in educational and state institutions, to cherish their national culture and to enjoy state-building myths focused mainly on the events of the Great Patriotic War (1941-45). Rallies in support of Crimea have been of an unprecedented scale. Initially originating in Moscow, these actions quickly spread nationwide attracting thousands of participants in Siberia, the south of the country, the Far East, and the Urals. The first Moscow rally, which took place on 6 March 2014, witnessed as many as thirty thousand participants, while the number of partakers in subsequent gatherings climbed well over one hundred thousand.¹⁵

¹² The group aims to prevent Russia from adopting juvenile justice patterns practiced in most countries of Western Europe, as well as family laws related to child rearing practices advocated in those countries. In particular, they are outspoken against the abolition of the terms 'mother' and 'father' and their replacements 'parent A' and 'parent B'. These activists fear that tightening legislation on domestic violence could give the state a *carte blanche* to remove children from poor, but functional families, and transfer them to public care.

¹³ The fate of the Khimki forest movement is an example. Once large, active, and prominent, the movement had gradually subsided, partly because its most prominent leader Yevgeniya Chirikova adopted a radically liberal Western-focused political agenda that began diverging from the city interests and the initial goals of the movement. This effectively sealed the fate of the network as a nation-wide ecological organisation, making it a small liberal interests club (Clement 2011).

¹⁴ Ryzhkov, Gozman, Nadezhdin in Solovyev and Babayan.

The surge of civic enthusiasm was seen in the significant increase in Vladimir Putin's public approval rating, which rose to 76.2 per cent in March 2014, climbing further to 82.2 per cent in April, and reaching 86.2 per cent in May 2014.¹⁶ It is important that there was no support of Russia's direct military involvement in the Ukrainian crisis as such, for many movements' participants were against the war. Opinion polls taken between March and August 2014 consistently indicated that nearly two thirds of Russians were against deployment of the Russian Army in Ukraine, despite being supportive of the Russian population in Eastern Ukraine and Crimea.¹⁷

The oppositional view to Russia's action in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine was also present albeit it was less prevalent. Liberal activists organised Marches for Peace, in which they supported the Ukrainian *Maidan* movement and disagreed with Kremlin policies towards Crimea. Even though liberals were a minority within Russian society, the 15 March 2015 protest gathered as many as 15,000 participants.¹⁸ However, it is also important that a silent understanding of Russia's point of view was present even in those gatherings. Many of those who took part in the 2014 protests in defence of Ukrainian statehood felt, according to the Moscow Institute of Collective Action, that the West adopted a one-sided position, shifting the blame squarely on the Russian authorities and overlooking some gross shortcomings on behalf of the Ukrainian government.¹⁹

The height of the crisis saw a large number of charity organizations collecting

¹⁵ 'Bolee sta desiati tysiach chelovek prishli na miting v podderzhku Kryma v Moskve,' *Rossiiskaia Gazeta*, 18 March 2014; see also 'Moskovskii Miting v Podderzhku Kryma Sobral 50 tyshchak chelovek,' *lenta.ru*, 7 March 2014, available at <http://lenta.ru/news/2014/03/07/meeting/>, last accessed 22 October 2015.

¹⁶ 'VTsIOM: Reiting Putina Obnovil Maksimum i dostig 89.9,' *RIA Novosti*, available at <http://ria.ru/politics/20151022/1306168855.html#ixzz3pICpHUsv>, last accessed 22 October 2015.

¹⁷ 'Dve Treti Rossiyan – Protiv Vvoda Voisk na Ukrainu,' *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, 9 July 2014. It is also important that nearly 50 per cent of the VTsIOM respondents refused to boycott Ukrainian goods, 66 per cent feels that Russia should not deploy military force in Ukraine, and 33 per cent think that this should be entirely forbidden.

¹⁸ 'Marsh Mira v Moskve Protiv Voennogo Vmeshatelstva v Krymu,' *RBC*, 15 March 2014, available at <http://www.rbc.ru/photoreport/15/03/2014/911321.shtml>, last accessed 22 October 2015.

¹⁹ 'Sotsiolog Karin Clement o Novom Rossiiskom Patriotizme: Liudi Pochuvstvovali Gordost za Svoju Stranu,' RFI, 21 October 2014, available at <http://ru.rfi.fr/rossiya/20141020-sotsiolog-karin-kleman-o-novom-rossiiskom-patriotizme-lyudi-pochuvstvovali-gordost->, last access 21 November 2015.

clothing, medicine, and food for those affected by the *Donbass* warfare.²⁰ These operated through various social media networks such as Facebook and *V Kontakte*, churches, city Councils, telephone hot-lines, medium and small business outlets, and extensive diaspora networks. Volunteers and local businesses contributed towards expenses related to temporary accommodation shelters for refugees across Russia. A large number of Russian families accommodated refugees in their homes' spare bedrooms. In the course of one year of military tension between 2014 and 2015, Russia accepted over one million refugees from Eastern Ukraine, and grassroots civic activity played a large role in supporting the state in this endeavour.²¹ Liberal activists also took part. They established various human rights research groups that struggle for the rights of Ukrainian migrants with the view to improve their socio-economic positions within the Russian society.²²

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, developing civil society at a grassroots level is a long and thorny process. While assistance from external sources, such as the state or foreign agency can somewhat help the cause, genuine civil society is to grow from within local communities. It requires, as Robert Dahl (1989) noted, a critical mass of active and civically minded citizens. Hence, a particular climate of political-cultural social relationships has to be formed within the country. This socio-political climate has to reflect particular problems of the state in question. It has to respond to the specific needs of the citizens. It has to rely on the atmosphere of social trust and solidarity. These aspects cannot be created exogenously but have to develop gradually on the basis of experience, history, local culture, and local demands. From that point of view, Russia's Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev (2009) was right to claim that 'Russia's democracy will not copy foreign patterns automatically. Civil society cannot be bought with foreign grants. Mimicking customs of advanced Western societies cannot reshape our political culture'. Yet, gradual evolution of grassroots movements that reflect the problems of Russian society gives observers a positive hope for

²⁰ 'Goryachyaya Liniya Pomoshchi Bezhentsam,' available at <https://pombezh.ru/pub/hotline>, last access 22 October 2015.

²¹ 'Issledovanie RBK: Skolko Rossiya Tratit na Ukrainskikh Bezhentsev,' *RBK*, 22 June 2015, available at <http://www.rbc.ru/special/society/22/06/2015/5575e79e9a79473a63e39b35>, last accessed 22 October 2015.

²² 'Migranty s Ukrainy Begut v Evropu,' *gazeta.ru*, 28 October 2015, available at http://www.gazeta.ru/politics/2015/10/28_a_7849775.shtml, last accessed 30 October 2015.

the future of civic activity in this country. Surely, this will not happen overnight but with patience, accumulation of practice, and a gradual building of trust between the state and society, this goal does not seem to be out of reach.

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