

Societal Foundations for Self-Governance

Paul T. Christensen
Political Science Department
Boston College

Since the middle of the Gorbachev period, much has been written about the (re)emergence of civil society and the rapid appearance of social organizations in Russia and throughout the post-communist world. Of late, however, society and social organizations appear mainly as footnotes to the discussions of politics in the Russian Federation. This is not particularly surprising, given continuing struggles over “reform,” the ongoing war in Chechnya, the international community’s preoccupation with terrorism, and not least given the absence of any dramatic social unrest or “mobilization from below.” This absence of discussion about society, however, is troubling for those interested in self-governance in Russia. Not only does this absence reflect the weak and threatened societal foundations for such governance, it also highlights the general lack of attention given to social conditions in Russia—by the Russian state, other states in the international system, and international institutions alike. Scholars who are concerned with social empowerment and democratization in the post-communist world have repeatedly noted the difficulty that civil society faces in carving out a space for itself across the region. Boris Kagarlitksy barely exaggerates when he writes that civil society in Russia “perished even before it had managed to appear,”¹ and there is little doubt that Russian society remains largely excluded from politics.²

There are a number of factors that contribute to this societal exclusion. Since this paper focuses on the *societal* part of the self-governance equation, I will touch on the “non-societal” factors only briefly. First and perhaps most immediately important is the

structure of state institutions (including laws), bureaucracies, formal and informal procedures, and the composition and outlook of state elites. Taken together, these institutions and actors set the overall context in which society or any group within it has to function: what in the literature on comparative social movements is referred to as the *political opportunity structure*.³ I would argue that in spite of formal democratic procedures in the electoral sphere, the political opportunity structure in Russia remains severely restricted and antagonistic towards social mobilization and political participation. The second factor is the economy, equally its structure and current condition, which for the majority of society acts as an impediment to political involvement. The third major factor is the international context of globalization in which society has to function, which has both positive and negative implications for the evolution of self-governance in Russia. Depending on how they are constructed and assembled, the above factors can be important foundations for self-governance, or, as in the case of Russia, they can be ramparts built against it; emphasizing the power of these factors at the outset will help to place subsequent comments on societal factors in context.

Self-Governance: Concepts and Arenas

In the theoretical and comparative literature that addresses the subject, the concept of self-governance is used in three distinct ways. The first relates primarily to the idea and practice of “devolution,” which itself can vary from a type of local or regional autonomy to a form of self-determination. In this usage, the term self-governance implies political control of a territory or by a group within a territory vis-à-vis a higher-order political/administrative unit, as in the case of Scotland or Wales in relation to

“London.” One might also think in this connection of the ethno-territorial politics of Russia’s regions or of the indigenous Peoples of the North.⁴ Self-governance in this meaning does not in any necessary way involve questions about how politics is structured *within* that territory or group. The latter two uses of the concept come from the “civil society literature,” which is concerned with the nature and role of civic associations and their relation to democratic politics. The issue of self-governance arises in connection with the internal functioning of these associations and with the relationship of these associations to the political system.

In the first instance, the question is how “self-governing” the association is—that is, are the decisions about goals and tactics made by the members, or by a professional cadre of association personnel? The debate over this issue involves not only Michels’ “iron law of oligarchy” versus “democratic self-governance” within associations, but also whether the decline of active-member associations and the increasing incidence of passive-member associations are eroding the purported benefits to democracy of associational life. If the lessons of engagement, debate, trust, cooperation, and leadership that one draws from participation in associations are an important foundation for political behavior outside of associations, then the decline of active membership associations is ominous for self-governance generally. On the other hand, if it is the public engagement of associations with issues of concern to members that is of primary importance in promoting self-governance, then the internal nature of associations is not as crucial.⁵

The second usage in the civil society literature focuses on the extent to which citizens directly participate in the discussion, adoption, and even implementation of public policies that affect the communities (however defined in a specific case) to which

they belong. This usage is similar to that found in some of the democratic theory literature under terms such as “direct democracy,” “participatory democracy,” or even “radical democracy.”⁶ And just as “civil society” is viewed as a public sphere that exists between the state and family/kinship group, so self-governance in this sense exists as a form of politics between representative democracy, understood as periodic electoralism (though not necessarily counterpoised to it), and either extra-systemic political action or political disengagement.

It seems to me that all of these ways of using the term self-governance are analytically defensible. However, because it has the broadest implications for the structure of political power and the continuous involvement of citizens, I am most concerned with the issue of direct participation raised by the final usage of the term self-governance discussed above. Therefore, self-governance is defined here as a system in which “citizens are empowered to engage in collective deliberation about public choices and where those choices are translated most fully into effective public policies.”⁷ In this definition, self-governance becomes a continuum of possible structural forms and forums that could range from collective decisions on devolution to more systematic structures for decision making about public choices on an ongoing basis.

There are two aspects of this definition that are particularly useful for thinking comparatively about self-governance. First, the definition does not limit the general sphere or specific issue area to which the study or practice of self-governance might be applied. What issues might fall under the rubric of “the political sphere” in one context might be very different from those issues that are appropriately considered “political” in another. Put another way, the very issue of what are defined as “public choices” is a

highly political one in its own right, and should be constitutive of any examination of self-governance in a comparative context. Similarly, the definition does not prejudge the issue of which spheres might be appropriate venues for self-governance. Most western scholars argue that self-governance is appropriate to the political sphere, which is defined in a way that reflects the practices of western capitalist democracies. But this removes by definitional fiat consideration of arguments that self-governance is appropriate in other spheres, such as the economy. In the socialist tradition broadly defined, the division between “civil society” and “market society” that one finds in the work of Adam Smith and other liberal thinkers is considered to be artificial and pernicious. On the one hand, it misrepresents the reality of the political economy of capitalism; on the other, it rules out of court discussions about control over property or any type of co-determination or worker self-management arrangements.⁸ In the case of Russia since the late Gorbachev period, I would argue that using the narrow “political sphere” definition discussed above has had highly negative consequences for policy making, scholarly analysis, and Russian society.

Second, this definition of self-governance leaves open the question of what forms “collective deliberation” might take. It is important to be agnostic toward the particular forms of association that might serve as components of self-governance and toward the ways in which they may combine to engage in collective deliberation. Again, this is not merely an item of theoretical interest. For example, in *The Tragedy of Russia’s Reforms*, Reddaway and Glinski discuss Yeltsin’s abolition of the soviets and how this action “deprive[ed] local self-government of any attributes of state power.”⁹ While this action was taken in part out of political expediency, it was made easier by the arguments

advanced by commentators in Russia and the West that any institutions originating in the Soviet period were *ipso facto* illegitimate in a post-Soviet “democratic” setting. The same argument could be made regarding the exclusion of the KPRF from the ranks of legitimate civil society organizations by many commentators, even though it remains one of the largest associations (along with the FNPR trade unions) in post-Soviet Russia.¹⁰

Virtue and Guilt by Association: Civil Society and Self-Governance

If we understand self-governance to be an extensive and intensive system of participatory democracy, the next question to be addressed is what societal conditions are necessary for such a system to succeed. Across the comparative literature, the short answer is that democracy of any variety requires a strong civil society to be durable. There is less agreement, however, about what civil society is, and how it relates to democracy.

The term most often encountered in the civil society literature is “association,” and it is associational life that provides the sinews of civil society. The most common use of the term “association” in this literature focuses on organized associational forms; some group that people have to go out (or, as is often the case in Europe and the United States these days, stay in) and join. The key attributes of these associations are that they are voluntary and private. In other words, they are not part of the state, nor sponsored by the state, and they are not family (since family is not voluntary). While this definition of association raises some interesting questions with regard to the Soviet Union, for example, associational life figures prominently in the almost all discussions of civil society.

The difficulty is that different commentators on civil society have disparate views on what types of associations should be included within civil society. For one group of authors, including Robert Putnam, and a number of the contributors to *Civil Society Before Democracy* (edited by Bermeo and Nord), to mention a few, any type of association that fits the voluntary and private description is a civil society group. A group need not be overtly political in any way—witness Putnam’s bowling leagues and Tenfelde’s choral societies in 19th century Germany—nor necessarily even democratic in its orientation to be counted.

Other authors insist that only associational groups that exhibit certain types of traits should be included. A typical example is Kumi Naidoo and Rajesh Tandon of the group CIVICUS, who argue that “a distinction must be made between associational life that includes all types of voluntarily formed and autonomous organizations and civil society, which narrows down this universe to those demonstrating civic norms.”¹¹ This usage is followed by many of the “third force” school of civil society,¹² who include toleration, inclusion, non-violence, and commitment to promoting the public good as indicative civic norms.

In thinking through these variations on the theme of civil society, I would argue for a relatively simple and non-normative definition of the concept, similar to the preceding definition of self-governance and for the same reasons. Therefore, civil society is defined here as “a shorthand term for the vast network of associational life that lies between the individual political actor and the state.”¹³

Particularly for comparative purposes, this conception seems preferable to me to either normative definitions or more finely subdivided ones. Normative definitions, such

as that advocated by CIVICUS, simply will not do. They put far too heavy a burden on and far too much faith in the analyst to “correctly” define what constitutes civic norms. While it may be possible to identify some universal norms, say in the area of human rights, that is a far cry from an analyst being able to identify in the abstract what constitutes the “public good.” While I certainly understand and even sympathize with the impulse to see civil society as a positive force, imposing such a normative definition strikes me as potentially quite dangerous, for two reasons: first, a preconceived normative definition of civil society might cause the analyst to discount important groups because they do not *seem* to fit the mold; second, it could lead to a kind of “civic imperialism” on the practical level, with groups coming in and telling locals how to run the shop. I would argue that post-communist Russia has seen both elements of the problem on more than one occasion.

By adopting a definition that is clearly limited (non-state/non-family) but otherwise inclusive, we can identify the entire field of groups that may be relevant for discussions of self-governance without ideological bias. It might well turn out that there are groups that are not easily placed on a “pro-self-governance/anti-self-governance” axis (any more than on a “for the public good” or “against the public good” axis), but that may have very different notions of what self-governance in any given case might be.

* * * *

There are two strands of argument in the civil society literature as to why associational life plays such a central role, one which might be termed “foundational” and the other “operational.” The two are not cleanly separable in most discussions, but the difference in emphasis is enough to warrant their delineation.

The theoretical argument for the foundational role of associations in establishing the basis for “good governance” takes as its premise that involvement in associations inculcates in people the habits necessary for civic engagement. In the words of Robert Putnam,

“[c]ivic associations contribute to the effectiveness and stability of democratic government, it is argued, both because of their ‘internal’ effects on individual members and because of their ‘external effects on the wider polity.

Internally, associations instill in their members habits of cooperation, solidarity, and public spiritedness. Tocqueville observed that ‘feelings and ideas are renewed, the heart enlarged, and the understanding developed only by the reciprocal action of men one upon the other.’”¹⁴

In these associations, people come together out of common interest, be it bird-watching or choral singing, concern over toxic wastes in their community or the functioning of their schools. In so doing, people must learn the arts of organizing, debate, cooperation, and even leadership in a relatively non-hierarchical setting. Not only do these associations instill the “habits of the heart” necessary for self-governance, they also highlight the efficacy and potential power of community-based self-organization. In essence, these associations are the “banks” for the accumulation of social capital; capital which can then be used for the development of self-governance if—and this is an important caveat going back to the early part of the paper—the other non-societal foundations are in place.

For Tocqueville in particular, the maintenance and continued vitality of such associations was particularly important, because he saw them as a counterweight to the “natural” tendency toward the centralization of power and authority in increasingly complex societies.¹⁵ This is not an easy problem to overcome. Since people have multiple demands on their time, many of which are more immediate than involvement in

associations, they become more willing to let others deal with public concerns; politicians and, I would argue, many NGO professionals, are at the same time all too willing to take over responsibility for those public concerns.

While there may be no substitute for associations in building social capital, it is also true that the dynamics of associations can undermine social capital. The social movement literature is replete with examples of factionalism, infighting, leadership struggles, and policy disputes that undercut associations and lead to alienation among participants. This has been particularly true for groups like the German Greens, that began as a diverse coalition of informal associations and evolved into a more formal and traditional party. While this has given the group more clout, it has also led to splits and a distancing of the movement from its grassroots.

On the “operational” side, associations are seen as important conduits for interest-aggregation and articulation in relation to issues that are more obviously of “public concern.” In this regard, the social movement literature is again helpful. Social movements rely on a number of different organizational mechanisms, formal and informal, to activate people. Among these are “social movement organizations (SMOs),” which resemble the civil society literature’s “associations” but are more obviously concerned with political issues (that is, “issues of public concern”) broadly defined. These SMOs serve as *mobilizing structures* and are central to the *framing processes* that take place in social movements. Mobilizing structures are defined as “those collective vehicles, informal as well as formal, through which people mobilize and engage in collective action,” and framing processes are ways in which “the shared meanings and definitions that people bring to their situation” are articulated.¹⁶

As the civil society and social movement literature make abundantly clear, the specific forms of mobilizing structures and framing processes vary widely across countries and across time. Part of the challenge in determining the possible forms and methods of construction of systems of self-governance is being sensitive to what types of mobilizing structures and frames are appropriate to a given place and time. While this is mainly the business of those social actors involved, good external analysis can be useful in helping social actors to identify appropriate forms of mobilization and frames, and in sensitizing outside actors (“transnational civil society groups” and Western governments that are operating in or making policy about Russia, for example) to the potential differences in approach to collective action in different settings.

Before we become too sanguine about the salutary effects of association on the prospects for self-governance, it bears remembering that the historical evidence indicates that associational life can be as anti-democratic in nature as the other way around. There are the cases, for example, of virulent nationalist movements in the 19th and 20th centuries, as Valerie Bunce notes:

For example, just as Germany featured a vibrant civil society on the eve of the collapse of democracy (as Klaus Tenfelde argues in this volume), so, to take a more recent example, the two republics within Yugoslavia that featured the richest civil society on the eve of that state’s collapse—that is, Serbia and Slovenia—subsequently moved in strikingly different political directions, with Serbia a stubborn, if thin, dictatorship and Slovenia well on the way to democratic consolidation. This was despite, moreover, the similar role of nationalism in both cases as a constructor and the conveyor of civil and political society.¹⁷

One might also cite the rise of far right and fundamentalist groups in a variety of countries and contexts, from Le Pen in France to Haidar in Austria and numerous neo-fascist groups in a reunited Germany, across the Atlantic to the militia-style groups in the

United States, and religious fundamentalist groups in all the major global confessions, Christian, Jewish, and Moslem alike.

Finally, I would like to highlight two further issues that call into question the typology of associations and their relationship to democratic governance. The first is the increasing incidence of “civil society” associations having relations to states that are far from meeting the criteria of complete independence. One of the central arguments advanced for the position that there was no civil society in the former communist states is that associations in those countries were state-run. But what are we to make of the increasing incidence of putatively non-governmental civil society associations relying for their funding either on states directly, or perhaps more often on foundations and other NGOs that themselves receive their funding from states or IGOs made up of states? The problem here runs in two directions. Associations may try to tailor their mobilizing mechanisms and frames to fit what they think foundations want to fund, thereby potentially altering the very nature of the association. In addition, this can lead to competition among associations for funding that might otherwise find common cause, thereby weakening rather than strengthening civil society.¹⁸ In the other direction, foundations and states, even with the best of intentions, can in the guise of bringing their experience to bear on societies where civil society has been traditionally weak create conditions (and forms of association) that have little resonance in the societies involved.

The second issue is accountability. This is a problem that has been cited particularly in reference to transnational civil society organizations, but affects purely indigenous associations as well. Many theorists of civil society worry about the effects on democracy of society transferring too much decision-making power to the state at ever

greater remove from the grassroots. But what of the case of the state transferring—or some might argue abrogating—its responsibilities for aspects of public policy to private concerns? Public school systems, for example, can be criticized for being bureaucratic and unaccountable to local communities, but does effectively privatizing education through a system of vouchers really serve to enhance the possibilities for “public deliberation” on a question as vital and clearly political as education? To take an example from the international civil society realm, Ann Florini notes that part of the problem of legitimacy for transnational groups is:

the lack of obvious means for holding transnational civil society accountable. Governments that fail to represent their citizens can be voted out of office in democracies, or overturned. Corporations that fail to serve their employees, customers, or shareholders can suffer high turnover, declining sales, or stockholder revolts. But when Transparency International publishes a survey indicating that some countries are hopelessly corrupt, and aid to those countries is then slashed on the basis of their corruption, what is their redress?¹⁹

This is only a particular form of a broader problem, which is that when you are speaking of associations that are expressly political, their interests tend to be highly focused and they are well-organized in pursuit of those interests. The broader populace tends to have interests that are more diffuse and harder to organize. Since states and corporations, for example, tend to prefer to deal with concrete interlocutors, the views of associations with focused interests can be easily overrepresented.

Capital (Social and Otherwise), Civil Society, and Self-Governance

Accepting the argument that associational life helps to produce the social capital necessary for the durable functioning of democracy and, potentially, self-governance, leads directly to the question of resources. What effect, if any, does the availability of material resources have on people’s ability to participate in associations, civil society,

and systems of self-governance? In other words, what role does real capital, as opposed to social capital, play in this scenario?

Analysts of the growth of civil society as far back as Hegel have linked economic development and the growth in power of various economic groups to the emergence and strength of civil society. In his discussion of 19th century Europe, Philip Nord notes that “Europe in the middle decades of the century was buoyed by an economic boom of unprecedented scale, a boom that ignited the growth of cities and, with them, of the urban middle classes.” He continues that it was the “combination of material prosperity and wide-ranging institutional redesign that motored the associational mania of mid-century. Economic organizations—chambers of commerce, employer associations, trade unions—grew apace, so too fraternal bodies and civic action groups.”²⁰

If the lack of material prosperity being a barrier to the building of effective associational life is true on an aggregate level for a society, the issue becomes even more important when one factors in material inequality. For the poor, even in prosperous societies, the problems of collective action are magnified. The growth of trade-unions in 19th century Europe was not the result of increasing prosperous workers associating to defend their gains, as was true of chambers of commerce and employer associations. Rather, it was their growing understanding of their common condition of deprivation that created impulse to organize. The growth of unions was a classic example of social movement generation: a shared sense of grievance coupled with a belief that collective action could ameliorate if not solve the problem. And lack of material resources, combined with antagonistic institutions, made it devilishly hard for trade unions in Europe and elsewhere. Likewise, increasing levels of poverty and material inequality in

Russia since 1991 have made resource availability a central issue for social groups and associations across the country.

The problem remains as salient today as it was in the 19th century, albeit in differing degrees globally. It is difficult to see how associational life can flourish among those two billion or so people living on less than a dollar a day, in spite of the remarkable accomplishments of the Grameen Bank, peasant cooperatives in South Asia, or the People's Rural Education Network in India. The same is true of many "third wave" democracies, of which Russia is arguably one. In comparing these states to states in the 19th century, Nancy Bermeo remarks that marketization in the 19th century also caused economic marginalization, but because the marginalized lacked a host of democratic rights that "the economically weak and the politically disenfranchised were often one and the same. The shut out were also the shut up." She continues that "[t]oday the coincidence of marketization and democratization has produced a vast array of people who are economically marginalized but politically empowered. The political rights of the marginalized are often abused and underutilized, but they have a *potential* power that is, in national terms, unprecedented."²¹

Calling the populations of most of these states "politically empowered" is accurate only in the most formalistic of ways, and the central question is how the economically marginalized can realize "potential power" without significant resources for mobilization. Eric M. Uslaner and Paul Dekker make the point more directly:

Neither civic engagement nor trust can be a quick fix because it may be more difficult to build either than we imagined. Both civic engagement and trust are lower when there is substantial economic inequality. We noted above that the poor, minorities, immigrants, and women have access to fewer social ties than do more affluent white males, largely because of differences in economic (and educational) resources.

Many reformers, including the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, see social capital as part of the solution for ending poverty in the Third World. Yet, to the extent that both civic engagement and trust *depend on* economic equality, rather than stem from it, social capital may prove to be an elusive solution to a variety of problems.²²

While it may be an obvious point—even overly obvious one—poverty and perhaps even high degrees of relative economic inequality are very difficult to combine with a robust civil society, at least as far as the usually large sectors of the marginalized and impoverished are concerned. This observation calls for some serious analysis of the types of economic systems and economic reforms that might be necessary to make self-governance work; it also explains at least in part why arguments about the extension of democracy are so politically sensitive.

Russia, Civil Society, and Self-Governance

As I noted at the outset of this discussion, a congenial political opportunity structure is critical to the development and success of civil society and its associations. If I neglect this side of the equation, it is out of an interest in focus rather than a lack of interest in the issue. Still, a few comments in this regard are in order. The legalization of independent associations under Gorbachev was an important step in the development of civil society in Russia, but legality is not the only issue. More important is the state's toleration of the activities of associations—that is, the extent to which the state refrains from using its coercive apparatus to harass or block social activism. In this regard, serious questions about the tolerance of the Russian state remain. In addition, the lack of what various scholars refer to as “connectedness” or “responsiveness” of the state to society and its associations is a significant barrier to societal influence in Russia today.²³

Turning from the state side of the equation to the societal one, the picture that emerges from Russia over a decade into the “transition” is that of a system in which the foundations for self-governance are formally quite strong and in practice extremely weak. What follows is not exhaustive, and is designed to suggest lines for further inquiry. Since virtually all analysts of civil society argue that the building of social capital is a long-term process, it makes sense to look back to the Soviet period and debates about the existence of civil society prior to *perestroika* before addressing the contemporary situation.

The range of opinion on the question of whether civil society existed under state socialism is quite broad. Repeated references to “the (re)birth of civil society” after the destruction of the communist regimes implies that civil society did not exist in any form, and of course for advocates of the totalitarian model any discussion about the existence of civil society was nonsensical.²⁴ More recently, Jan Kubik has advanced the idea of “imperfect civil societies under state socialism,” which include the “pseudo-civil society” of official associations, informal networks anchored in the *na levo* economy, the “anti-communist illegal transparent civil society,” (that is, dissidents), and others.²⁵ Even further along the spectrum is Ron Suny, who argues—particularly in reference to national groups in the Soviet Union in the post-Stalin decades—that “underneath the deceptive stability of the political structures, a fuse had already been lit by the 1960s—with the appearance of a powerful, articulate civil society expressing itself in a national idiom.”²⁶

Apart from nationality groups, which had perhaps an easier time constituting themselves as an element of civil society due to the recognition of ethnic particularism as legitimate by Soviet nationalities policy, the record of (even nominally) independent associations is spotty, and the regime’s level of toleration varied. As is well known, any

manifestation of independent associationalism coming from Soviet workers was dealt with swiftly and brutally, since anything that smacked of working-class opposition to the state called into question the very legitimacy of the regime. The picture looked rather different for environmental organizations, which proved to be both popular and enduring throughout the Soviet period, even though they were sometimes at odds with the regime over developmental policies and environmental practices.²⁷

It is difficult to know exactly what to make of the official associations, such as the trade unions, the Academy of Sciences, the Komsomol, and a host of others, that existed during the Soviet period. They certainly were not independent of the state, so in the strict sense of the civil society literature they were not voluntary associations and therefore not civil society groups. Still, in a system where the state embraced as much as it could of society, which was a great deal, diversity and “internal associationalism” was bound to develop, and all indications are that they developed extensively. While very few of these institutions survived the break-up of the Soviet Union in tact, many of them mutated into related associations with many of the same people after 1991, and people who met within these associations often went on to form new groups with like-minded colleagues.²⁸

In the final analysis, the state in the Soviet Union (and to a greater and lesser extent the regimes of East Europe) was relatively successful in eliminating or maintaining control over the public sphere, but it was less so in maintaining control over the internal dynamics of its own creations and thus limiting the evolution of at least informal associationalism and civil society. Whether one calls what existed during the Soviet period civil society or not, the rapid emergence of society-based groups once Gorbachev began *perestroika* is certain evidence that the notion of complete societal atomization was

wrong. Whatever has been built in post-communist Russia—democracy, authoritarian corporatism, industrial feudalism;²⁹ there are many candidates—it certainly was not built from scratch, politically, economically, or socially.

As far as associational life and the material bases necessary to support it—the two basic elements of the societal foundation for potential self-governance—are concerned, post-Soviet Russia provides evidence for cautious optimism and rather less cautious pessimism. Russia has seen the emergence of tens of thousands of associations concerned with the most varied of interests and issues, and not just in the major cities of Moscow and St. Petersburg but across the country. The issue, however, is not merely what globalization theorists would call the extensity of associational life, but also its intensity and the internal qualities of the associations themselves. There is also the issue of resource mobilization, and the question of Russian society's relationship to global civil society actors and the process of globalization more generally.

The rebuilding of Russia's associational life in response to openings in the political opportunity structure before and after 1991 (and at times even in spite of the restricting of political opportunities) has been in many ways remarkable. While a complete catalog of these associations is impossible here, it is also not necessary to make the point. We have seen the rise (and fall) of a plethora of political parties from the serious to the absurd, the (partial) restructuring of trade unions, and the proliferation of business-related associations in response to economic change. The emergence of these latter groups, particularly those concerned with small-business and professional interests, is certainly of great interest given the importance for civil society in capitalist states of similar groups in other historical contexts. In the Russian context, the difficulties

encountered by such groups in dealing with organized crime, state corruption, and international competitors is an important indicator of how far Russia has come, or has not come, and where it might be going.³⁰

A significant amount has been written in Russia and the west about the emergence of independent women's organizations from the Gorbachev period to the present.³¹

There are now hundreds of women's groups in Russia, and they reflect a wide range of attitudes and political/ideological positions as well as of interests and issues. Some are extremely conservative and traditional, wishing to return women to the home and family. Others are concerned with the problem of domestic violence, still others with women's economic empowerment, and some with providing educational opportunities to women and men, specifically in terms of women's studies programs.

The picture in terms of environmental groups looks similar. According to Mirovitskaya, by 1992 there were "more than 840 non-governmental environmental organizations in the Russian Federation alone—operating at the local, inter-regional and international levels. Many organizations dealing with the urban environment and the preservation of cultural and historical heritage were not included in this total."³² The focus of these groups' activities vary from expanding protected areas in Russia to preserving Lake Baikal to cleaning up rivers to the inventorying and recycling of industrial waste. The 1990s also saw the publication of numerous environment-oriented newspapers in diverse regions of Russia.

These examples could be multiplied to include associations concerned with virtually every type of social issue or group. There are organizations made up of activists from and people interested in the welfare of the indigenous peoples of Siberia, as

described by Marjorie Mandelstam Balzer in *The Tenacity of Ethnicity*. There are numerous associations that attempt to work on behalf of the gay, lesbian, and transsexual community in Russia, as noted in Laurie Essig's book *Queer in Russia*.³³ One could mention groups like "Mothers of Soldiers" and others concerned with things military, neo-fascist organizations, religious associations, and the list goes on. And these are just that groups that might be considered directly or indirectly political; secondary associations of the choral society and bird-watching variety discussed by Putnam also abound.

The extensity of associational life only tells a part of the story, however. The next question is what does all this amount to, in terms of providing the foundations for self-governance? Most analysts of these associations, while generally applauding their emergence over the last decade, identify what seem to be a series of common problems that affect many if not most of these groups. I would cite three that recur with disturbing regularity.

The first is that large numbers of these associations (with the exception of some trade unions and environmental groups) are small and isolated from other groups with similar concerns. In part, this may be the result of the narrowness of the issue or the populations with which the group is concerned. However, there is also considerable evidence to suggest that many groups do not even try to expand their memberships, or make concerted attempts to retain or activate those members that are formally part of the association. There are a number of reasons for this, among them the time and expense involved in recruitment, lack of experience in grassroots organizing and lingering distrust of anything smacking of "mobilization," and the absence or limited availability of the

infrastructures that make social mobilization practicable in western Europe and the United States. In this latter category are systems of direct mailing at discounted rates, the existence of social organization coordinating groups like the Public Interest Research Group in the US, and even accurate and sharable membership lists.

The second, and in some ways related, problem is the fractious and often personalistic nature of many of these associations. This problem has been particularly visible in the case of political parties, but analysts see the same processes at work in the women's movement, among trade unions, and in environmental organizations. As both Sperling and Essig note in relation to women's organizations and gay groups, the "association" is often little more than a person, an apartment, and a computer. It is difficult to know if this is a problem primarily associated with the "newness" of civic organizing that will fade as more successful groups consolidate and absorb less successful ones, or whether it is a manifestation of the factionalization that one sees in many civil society and social movement contexts. There is also anecdotal evidence that many of these organizations are run internally in a rather authoritarian manner, which does little to advance the cause of building social capital through associational participation.

The third problem, which is a refrain running throughout the literature on civil society and social movements in post-communist Russia, is the lack of resources, monetary and otherwise, from which these associations suffer. The enormous success of associations like Greenpeace, the Sierra Club, NOW, the Christian Coalition, and countless other civil society groups in the United States has come in significant measure from their ability to raise money. This is done through dues, subscriptions, donations,

fund-raising drives, and so on directed at members and non-members alike. The direct mail fund-raising system has been a boon to many of these groups, because it is cheap, reaches a wide audience, and does not demand too much from those on the receiving end except writing a check. While many civil society advocates dislike organizations that rely too heavily on these methods for that very reason, the effectiveness of the method is undeniable.

This raises two issues for civil society in Russia. The first is that the lack of this kind of fund-raising infrastructure makes gathering resources very difficult. Going door to door or sending people out to street corners and parks and subway entrances can certainly work, but it demands a great deal of time, energy, and bodies, and it is rather haphazard in terms of targeting likely populations. The second is that much of the evidence derived from the examples of Europe and United States suggests that a growing proportion of associational or civil society activity is a middle-class phenomenon, relying as much if not more on monetary resources than actual citizen activation. To put it bluntly, other things being equal, the poor are very difficult to mobilize, and self-mobilization is harder still. Given the economic trauma, the decline in living standards, reduction in real wages, the high unemployment and underemployment levels, and the widespread incidence of poverty in Russia that have accompanied the last decade of reform, it is not surprising that associations in the country are resource-poor and likely to stay that way for some time to come.

This brings me to the final point that I want to make about resource issues and civil society in Russia, which concerns the complications that have arisen for many associations due to globalization and how Russia has been inserted into the globalization

process. A large number of the civil society groups in the areas discussed above have been the recipients of small- to medium-scale funding from external organizations. This money has come from groups in the same issue-areas that operate abroad, mostly in the countries of Western Europe and the US, and/or from foundations that receive their funds from governmental and non-governmental sources outside Russia. While there is certainly nothing wrong with this in principle, it has had some problematic effects. It is perhaps not surprising, given the rise of anti-Western feeling in Russia in recent years, that a group's acceptance of western funding can be used against it as a sign that it does not really have the best interests of Russia at heart. Much of this might be sour grapes, but it does have some purchase. The more important negative effect, in my view, is that the number of associations wanting money and the amount of money available are not commensurate. This has led to bitter rivalries, competition for funds, and the diversion of the already limited resources of Russian civil society groups from their primary interests to the courting of foundations. The other aspect of globalization that matters in this regard is simply that Russia was thrust into the global economy without the institutional or economic strength to mitigate some its more baleful effects, and this has only intensified the problems that the population, and Russian associations, face in attempting to build the social capital that would make self-governance a realistic possibility in the future. Again, this may be a temporary (if decade-old) problem that will recede as Russia's "transition" advances, but at this point arguing that it will recede seems to me to be more an exercise in faith than sound prediction based on available evidence.

To summarize, the positive developments of the last decade in terms of the increasing extensity of associations and civil society more generally are countered by the

weakness in the overall intensity of their operation and the lack of resources with which most of these associations have to deal. The development of civil society is effected positively and negatively by the context of globalization, understood in the sense of both the increasing involvement of transnational civil society groups and the operation of the global political economy taken as a whole. While it is unfair to argue as some have that civil society was stillborn in Russia, it is true that civil society remains fragile and threatened, particularly if one factors in recent developments in state policy under Putin.

Conclusions: Current History and Future Prospects

The relative quiescence of Russian society in the face of the most serious peacetime economic collapse in modern history is rather remarkable, and this in itself begs for explanation. Part of that explanation is Russians' weariness with upheaval, part a distrust of associationalism derived from the Soviet period, and part the lack of a viable alternative model to the neo-liberalism imposed on Russia by the forces of globalization and its own elites. The greatest part of the explanation, however, is that Russian society has been functionally if not formally excluded from political life by an authoritarian state and elite; and much of society has been denied the resources to participate through impoverishment. For those interested in the future of the Russian state, Russian democracy, and for the prospects of self-governance in Russia, the societal variable is a crucial one, but at this point it is largely missing. In a recent survey, the Public Opinion Foundation in Russia reported that 44% of Russians "are making no plans for the future," and that over half "believe they have no chance of becoming well-to-do." The only group that was "optimistic," constituting 18% of respondents, were urban residents under 35 with college degrees.³⁴ In other words, those most likely to benefit from the

concentration of political power and financial capital, domestic and global, in Moscow, St. Petersburg, and a handful of other major cities. The author of the article described Russia as “A Society in Apathy,” but it seems rather more like despair than apathy for large sectors of the population.

To put this discussion in a broader context, I would note that the problem of society’s alienation from the institutions and practices of democratic governance is not a uniquely Russian phenomenon. In a survey published in 1997 by the European Commission, respondents were asked how satisfied they were with the way democracy is developing in their countries. In Russia, 8% were satisfied and 82% were dissatisfied. Yet among candidates for membership in the EU, only 38% indicated they were satisfied, and among respondents from EU member states, 45% indicated satisfaction and 51% said they were dissatisfied.³⁵ While the reasons for the responses may well be quite different, commonplace remarks about the facelessness of the EU bureaucracy or the power of big money in US politics suggests a concern about the distance of government and governance from society. It is this, perhaps, that provides the impetus for discussion about the strength of civil society and the possibilities for greater self-governance.

The question remains how do societies go about overcoming their dissatisfaction with the operation of democracy? The answer, “by strengthening civil society,” is comforting, but there are serious problems in doing so, and ambiguities that remain even if it is accomplished. In a rather disheartening passage from a comparative perspective, Robert Putnam argues that the best predictor of the future strength of civil society is the past strength of civil society. Strength breeds strength, and weakness in a vicious cycle breeds weakness. How to go about strengthening civil society is a complex problem, for

the citizens involved and for those who might want to give advice. In the Russian case, there is no question that the “disconnectedness” of the state is a serious issue, and policies that guaranteed greater access to and accountability from state officials would of course help. As noted above, current trends in this regard are not encouraging. The existence of a strong state, though, is not itself the problem; how that strength is used in the formation of the political opportunity structure is the issue. A weak state is not particularly conducive of a strong civil society either. Just as state toleration of associational activity is important, an institutional and legal context which fosters mutual toleration among associations can play a positive role in the evolution of civil society, and only strong states can provide this context at present. The central problem is that in Russia a “strong state” has always been associated with excessive centralization, authoritarianism, and lack of accountability. A strong civil society could help to overcome these problems, but how it gains a foothold given the current structure of the Russian state remains perhaps the central contradiction of post-communist politics in Russia.

Insofar as a lack of material resources is a problem for civil society groups in Russia, economic recovery and economic policies that reduce the massive inequalities of wealth that resulted from shock therapy would be a significant step forward from a societal perspective. What these policies might be—changes in tax laws, standards regarding minimum wages and benefits, state-led export-oriented (re)industrialization, or even a revisiting of the results of privatization³⁶--is an extremely controversial subject, and a debate about them is beyond the scope of this paper. This does not change the fact that the resource issue is one that has to be addressed. Other basic infrastructure

improvements could also play an important role. If the experience of western Europe and the United States is any guide, special financial provisions for non-profit organizations, reliable and widely available communications systems, and even a well-functioning postal service would be a boon to associational life in Russia.

If one can imagine for a moment that all the above challenges are met, that a vibrant civil society exists, and that the societal foundations for self-governance are all in place, there remains the final question of what a system of self-governance might look like in Russia. I do not have the answer to this, and I do not think anyone does, either for Russia or any other society. If the comparative analyses of the growth and shape of *civil society* undertaken by scholars tells us anything, it is that any system of *self-governance* will draw heavily on past experience and existing cultural norms regarding what constitutes arenas of public choice.

For some groups in Russia, self-governance might mean greater political autonomy for ethnic minorities who have their own traditions of group decision making. For others, it might mean local control over neighborhood development through housing associations (as was theoretically supposed to be the case in some of the *novyi raions* in Moscow, for example). Direct community involvement in decisions regarding ecology and economic development, for example, might be important to groups like the Society to Defend Baikal. Workers (and perhaps their trade unions) in industrial plants might be more interested in some form of “co-determination,” either at the plant or a higher level. This was certainly part of the idea, at least theoretically, behind Gorbachev’s worker self-management proposals and Yeltsin’s tripartite commission—“social partnership” as self-

governance. These, of course, are only a few examples of the broad range of possible forms of and arenas within self-governance could evolve.

For the analyst, the main point is not to begin an examination of this question with too many preconceived notions about what self-governance “must” be. It is all the more important for representatives of other states or foreign foundations that might be interested in supporting self-governance in Russia. If Peter Reddaway and Dmitri Glinski are right—which I think they are—the “Russian democratic tradition” as shaped by Russian history is more “participatory and egalitarian” than its western counterpart. They go on to argue that in this tradition, democratic institutions “tended to be built around the *representation of collective interests*” and that “democracy in Russia had a track record of *clashing with centralized and coercive ‘revolutions from above’* that claimed to be moving the nation toward the common denominator of European modernity” as understood by Russia’s elites.³⁷

The point of their analysis is that the attempted importation of western understandings of democracy, particularly when combined with an equally western importation of neo-liberalism, continues to have extremely negative effects on Russia and on the very idea of democracy in the country. While I agree with them entirely, my point is rather different. In spite of the recent “quietness” of society in Russia, history as painted by Reddaway and Glinski suggests that the cultural repertoire of democracy might be more radical and more conducive to self-governance than one might think given current history. The question for the future of Russia—its society and state—is whether these democratic impulses can be channeled through existing structures in the peaceful and evolutionary way that the dominant forces of political globalization have come to

expect, or whether further instability and upheaval will mark Russia's still unfinished revolution.

¹ Boris Kagarlitsky, *The Return of Radicalism: Reshaping the Left Institutions*, (London: Pluto Press, 2000), p. 92.

² See also in this regard Peter Reddaway and Dmitri Glinsky, *The Tragedy of Russia's Reforms: Market Bolshevism Against Democracy*, (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace, 2001); and Michael Urban, Vyacheslav Igrunov, and Sergei Mitrokhin, *The rebirth of politics in Russia*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), especially Chapter 12.

³ Doug McAdam, John D. McCarthy, Mayer N. Zald, editors, *Comparative Perspectives on Social Movements*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996). See the contributions in Part I for a discussion of the concept.

⁴ On the former see, for example, Mary McAuley, *Russia's Politics of Uncertainty* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); on the latter, Marjorie Mandelstam Balzer, *The Tenacity of Ethnicity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999).

⁵ On this debate, see Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000); also Per Selle and Kristin Stromsnes, "Membership and Democracy," in Paul Dekker and Eric M. Uslaner, editors, *Social Capital and Participation in Everyday Life* (London: Routledge, 2001)

⁶ A useful discussion of the subject can be found in Michael Saward, "Democratic Theory and Indices of Democratization," in David Beetham, editor, *Defining and Measuring Democracy*, (London: Sage, 1994).

⁷ The definition is adapted from Robert Putnam, *Making Democracy Work*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), p. 115. In adopting this definition, I do not mean to infer agreement with Putnam's overall conclusions on the issue of what makes for "good governance."

⁸ This was not, of course, the subject of mere theoretical speculation during the transitions from communism in eastern Europe or the former Soviet Union. Definitions of what were appropriate spheres had extremely important practical political effects.

⁹ Reddaway and Glinski, pp. 319-20.

¹⁰ Stephen F. Cohen, *Failed Crusade*, (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2001), p. 35, p. 130, pp. 291-2, f.63.

¹¹ CIVICUS, *Civil Society at the Millennium*, (West Hartford, CT.: Kumarian Press, 1999), p. 13.

¹² See, for example, Ann M. Florini, editor, *The Third Force: The Rise of Transnational Civil Society*, (Tokyo: Japan Center for International Exchange and Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2000).

¹³ Nancy Bermeo, "Civil Society After Democracy: Some Conclusions," in Nancy Bermeo and Philip Nord, *Civil Society Before Democracy: Lessons from Nineteenth-Century Europe*, (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2000), p. 238.

¹⁴ Robert Putnam, *Making Democracy Work*, pp. 89-90.

¹⁵ See McGinniss and Ostrom, "Democratic Transformations: From the Struggle for Democracy to Self-Governance," pp. 5-11.

¹⁶ Doug McAdam, John D. McCarthy, and Mayer N. Zald, "Introduction: Opportunities, mobilizing structures, and framing processes—toward a synthetic, comparative perspective on social movements," in *Comparative Perspectives on Social Movements*, p. 3 and 5.

¹⁷ Valerie Bunce, "The Historical Origins of the East-West Divide: Civil Society, Political Society and Democracy in Europe," in Bunce and Nord, *Civil Society Before Democracy*, p. 214.

¹⁸ See, for example, Valerie Sperling, *Organizing Women in Contemporary Russia*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 232-236. Also Michael Edwards, *Future Positive* (London: Earthscan, 2000), on the problem of cooperation among NGOs in the international development field.

¹⁹ Ann M. Florini, "Lessons Learned," in Ann M. Florini, editor, *The Third Force*, p. 234. She goes on to argue that is not as serious a problem as some have argued, since those groups whose information or activities prove untrustworthy or dangerous will lose credibility and will not survive long. This seems to sanguine a conclusion. It may not be easy for people to check the accuracy of information, even in the computer age, and there are plenty of examples of wrong-headed programs supported by NGOs that continue for a very long time, since NGOs are often more interested in the reactions of their donors than their ostensible constituencies. See Michael Edwards, *A Future Positive*.

²⁰ Philip Nord, "Introduction," in Bermeo and Nord, *Civil Society Before Democracy*, pp. xx-xxi.

²¹ Nancy Bermeo, "Civil Society After Democracy," in Bermeo and Nord, *Civil Society Before Democracy*, pp. 252-253. Italics mine.

-
- ²² Eric M. Uslaner and Paul Dekker, "The 'social' in social capital," in Paul Dekker and Eric M. Uslaner, *Social Capital and Participation in Everyday Life*, p. 183.
- ²³ Nancy Bermeo, "Civil Society After Democracy," in Bermeo and Nord, *Civil Society Before Democracy*, pp. 242-246; and Michael Saward, "Democratic Theory and Indices of Democratization," in Beetham, *Defining and Measuring Democracy*, pp. 13-16.
- ²⁴ See Stephen F. Cohen, *Rethinking the Soviet Experience*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), pp. 23-27.
- ²⁵ Jan Kubik, "Between the State and Networks of 'Cousins': The Role of Civil Society and Noncivil Associations in the Democratization of Poland," in Bermeo and Nord, *Civil Society Before Democracy*, pp. 181-207.
- ²⁶ Ronald Grigor Suny, *The Revenge of the Past: Nationalism, Revolution, and the Collapse of the Soviet Union*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), p. 131.
- ²⁷ Natalia Mirovitskaya, "The environmental movement in the former Soviet Union," in Andrew Tickle and Ian Welsh, *Environment and Society in Eastern Europe*, (Essex: Addison Wesley Longman, 1998), pp. 30-66; Douglas Weiner, *A Little Corner of Freedom: Russian Nature Protection from Stalin to Gorbachev*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).
- ²⁸ One example is the relationship of the old Soviet Women's Committee to various post-1991 women's organizations. Jane F. Berthussen Gottlick, "From the Ground Up: Women's Organizations and Democratization in Russia," in Jill M. Bystydzienski and Joti Sekhon, *Democratization and Women's Grassroots Movements*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), pp. 241-261; Valerie Sperling, *Organizing Women in Contemporary Russia*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 23-26.
- ²⁹ Richard Ericson, "Is Russia in Transition to a Market Economy?" *Post-Soviet Affairs*, 16/1 (2000), pp. 18-25.
- ³⁰ I am grateful to Eugene Huskey for his comments on these groups at the Liechtenstein Conference on the Future of the Russian State.
- ³¹ Mary Buckley, *Post-Soviet Women: from the Baltic to Central Asia*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); Nanette Funk and Magda Mueller, *Gender Politics and Post-Communism*, (New York: Routledge, 1993); Anastasia Posadskaya, *Women in Russia*, (London: Verso, 1995); Valerie Sperling, *Organizing Women in Contemporary Russia: Engendering Transition*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).
- ³² Natalia Mirovitskaya, "The Environmental Movement in the Former Soviet Union," in Tickle and Welsh, *Environment and Society in Eastern Europe*, p. 30.
- ³³ Laurie Essig, *Queer in Russia: A Story of Sex, Self, and the Other*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999). See also the website: www.gay.ru.
- ³⁴ Kirill Vasilenko, "A Society in Apathy," *Vremya Novostei*, reprinted in *JRL*, 7284, August 11, 2003.
- ³⁵ Results reproduced in Stephen White, *Russia's New Politics*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 276. It is unclear if these figures are for 1992 or later.
- ³⁶ On the latter point, see Raj M. Desai and Itzhak Goldberg, "The Vicious Circles of Control: Regional Governments and Insiders in Privatized Russian Enterprises," (Washington DC: The World Bank, 2000), Policy Research Working Paper #2287.
- ³⁷ Peter Reddaway and Dmitri Glinski, *The Tragedy of Russia's Reforms*, p. 52.