

A BALANCED ASSESSMENT OF RUSSIAN CIVIL SOCIETY

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Most analyses of civil society development in contemporary Russia tend to focus geographically on the city of Moscow and substantively on political elites, elections, and human rights violations. To the extent that the 141 million Russian citizens are mentioned, their experiences are usually represented by a handful of Muscovite human rights leaders. These leaders are certainly part of Russia's civil society, as are the many Russian citizens who have been victimized by the brutal war in Chechnya and other actions in the Caucasus. However, what of the other Russians? The story of the remaining 141 million matters and is yet untold.

In this article we present current assumptions about Russian civil society, that public space between the home and government where citizens act collectively. We then report some unexplored developments in Russian civil society, including pockets of public activism, NGO activity, and newly institutionalized frameworks for citizen participation in governance. We submit that these developments merit attention in assessments of contemporary Russian politics.

THE STIGMA OF BEARING GOOD NEWS

Is it possible to report some good news about Russia without being labeled naïve or, worse, a Putin apologist? Grassroots activists who report positive information often gets labeled as self-serving, wishful, coopted and even naïve. Academics who report positive information avoid only the self-serving label and risk being criticized as not just naïve but irrelevant.

We challenge readers to read these arguments with an open, if critical, mind. The problem is that few people apply a similarly critical lens to Freedom House reports and other pessimistic articles on Russia. These reports make sweeping claims about Putin's suppression of civil society based on only a handful of cases involving high profile individuals or organizations as analyzed by "country or

regional experts”, but such reports usually have no systematic, nationwide annual data on public activism and NGO activity. Putin has certainly done some distasteful things while in power, but these actions should not be conflated with the suppression of civil society.

We propose to assess Russian civil society in a more objective manner. Russia has witnessed repressive actions toward some organizations and individual activists, reporters, and election monitors. These instances should be documented as part of the track record of the Putin administration’s relationship with its citizens. However, Russia has also witnessed government that has been responsive to public participation at all levels: federal, regional, and local.¹ This too should be documented as part of the record.

Our ultimate goal, outside the scope of this article, is to find clarity on the

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questions of how much citizen participation there is in Russia, how much the government is facilitating or hindering participation, what other factors influence participation, how meaningful participation has been so far, and what the potential is for future citizen participation. Our more immediate mission is to encourage others to think critically about the current anecdotal evidence and to demand more objective, systematic, and convincing data on Russian civil society, whether or not the data correspond to the most notable anecdotes.

THE CURRENT CONVENTIONAL WISDOM

In the 2009 Freedom House report, Russia was labeled “not free”, and received a score of 6 out of 7 for political rights (the second worst score), 5 out of 7 for civil liberties (the third worst score), and an overall assessment as being even less free than the year before.² The scores and downward trend repeat the negative and declining assessments of the 2008 and 2007 reports, which listed the suppression of civil society and the assault on freedom of association among the stated reasons for the assessment.³ These rankings place Russia in the same category as Afghanistan, Algeria, Angola, Azerbaijan, Cambodia, Congo, Egypt, Oman, Pakistan, Qatar, Rwanda, Tajikistan, and the United Arab Emirates. Countries scoring better than Russia include Bahrain, Jordan, Kuwait, Pakistan, and Yemen, which were all ranked “partly free”.

Many scholars and journalists accept these rankings uncritically and proclaim that Russia is now like Algeria or Angola.⁴ Doing so makes good headlines because it sounds shocking and implausibly wild that Russia has degenerated to the depth

of countries that practice female genital mutilation and kill young girls for going to school.⁵ If we stop for a sober pause, though, do we really need long to decide between Rwandan or Algerian freedom and Russian freedom? Shouldn't we scratch our collective heads at such a comparison group and make sure we are right before saying "Russia is now like Afghanistan" or "Russia is worse than Yemen"?

Freedom House rankings serve a noble and important purpose for policy-makers and scholars, but the above list of comparison countries seems implausible because it probably is implausible when discussing severe restrictions to human freedoms such as the ability to assemble, speak your mind, and represent concerns to government. The root of the rankings problem probably lies in the overly generous assessments of Russian democracy in the 1990s that are etched in stone and not subject to retrospective analysis and correction.⁶ Since Freedom House cannot revise prior estimations downward, when it wants to show declines in political rights and civil liberties, it has little choice but to lower Russian rankings to the level of Rwanda.

The portrait of Russia has thus become a caricature, and not just because of Freedom House. Most western analyses offer comparable assessments of Russian civil society as browbeaten and unable to play a meaningful role in mediating between individual interests and the state.⁷ The question for these portrayals is: Where is the evidence? Who has systematically canvassed civil society organizations and average citizens across the vast Russian territory on an annual basis to study whether the public tries to exert influence on government, whether it has been successful, whether there are variations among Russian regions, and how the attempts and the success rates vary over time? Without systematic trend data, the oft-cited anecdotes that purport to show a decline in civil society could be challenged with equally convincing anecdotes of positive developments, such as those discussed below, as well as the emerging body of non-anecdotal evidence being amassed by Russian civic groups.

CRACKDOWN ON NGOs?

In 2006, Russian Federation Law #18-FZ expanded government authority to audit and require reporting from Russian NGOs.⁸ According to the executive director of the Europe and Central Asia Division of Human Rights Watch, "This unprecedented assault on the work of human rights groups will invariably undermine the rights of all Russians...Putting the bill into force will be catastrophic for the protection of human rights in Russia."⁹ Similarly, in 2007, Freedom House reported, "Russia received a downward trend arrow for the government intensified crackdown on NGOs, particularly those receiving foreign funding."¹⁰

The evidence with which we are familiar does not support such a strong claim of

a government intensified crackdown on either NGOs in general, or those receiving foreign funding in particular. Studies do reveal difficulties for Russian NGOs, mostly in trying to comply with the new legal reporting requirements of Law #18.¹¹ However, according to surveys and focus groups funded by the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) and conducted by the International Center for Not-for-Profit Law (ICNL) in 2007, Law #18 has not intensified the difficulties for NGOs, nor has it proven any more burdensome for human rights and advocacy groups than for other NGOs. The study revealed no change in the number of audits of NGO activities, the presence of uninvited state representatives, or the number of requests for information since the law went into effect.¹²

The above information does not gloss over the difficulties for Russian NGOs; it merely challenges interpretations of a downward trend in freedom when in reality there has been little change. According to the ICNL study, the number of audits of Russian NGOs has always been very high. Russian Federation Law #134-FZ, “On State Control over Legal Entities in the Russian Federation,” subjects all organizations to auditing no more than once every two years.¹³ Moreover, problems complying with the law are experienced by all NGOs, human rights or otherwise, due mainly to the ambiguity of certain provisions. As a result, in 2007, four out of five NGOs in Russia did not submit reports in the required format by the legislated deadline, leaving them potentially vulnerable to involuntary liquidation.¹⁴

Balanced reporting should mention this vulnerability and, according to an official of the Federal Registration Service (FRS) that registered NGOs at the time, the involuntary liquidation of 2,600 NGOs in 2007, primarily those which failed more than once to submit reports required under legislation predating Law #18. Balanced reporting should include mention of the decrease in registered NGOs in Russia from 675,600 in January 2007 to 655,400 in January 2008.¹⁵ However, balanced reporting should also include the fact that none of the NGOs surveyed by the ICNL in 2007 were penalized for non-submission or incorrect submission of reporting forms. In a survey of 1,054 NGO leaders who were asked to name the primary problems for the functioning of their organizations, “pressure on NGOs from government” was mentioned by only 2.9 percent of respondents, tying for 13th place with “co-workers do not have enough knowledge and skills” and falling well behind the first place response of “not enough money, material resources,” which was named by 59.1 percent of respondents.¹⁶

Moreover, when Russian NGOs are closed after audits, it is important to investigate the reasons why. Interviews with civil society organization leaders suggest that financial mismanagement, corruption and illegal operations, and the discovery that organizations are already defunct are common reasons for NGO liquidation.¹⁷ The perceptions of Russian elites support this assessment. In the 2007

Edelman Trust Barometer, Russian elites expressed a lower level of trust in NGOs than elites in any of the other ten countries surveyed. In most countries, NGOs were among the top two institutions trusted by elites.¹⁸ It should not be shocking to anyone familiar with Russia and used to seeing underhanded activity in the government, commercial, energy, and other sectors, that such activity might exist in the NGO sector as well. Civil society leaders are in many cases now working with the Russian government in partnership programs to promote trust in Russian NGOs as, for example, in the collaboration between NGOs and the Ministry of Justice in Kemerovo on a “best yearly report” competition for NGOs.¹⁹

If this financial reason for liquidating NGOs is widespread, the halting of malfeasance that gives civil society a bad reputation should be applauded rather than condemned as a crackdown. From many a Russian perspective, the halting of malfeasance can increase the professionalism of, and trust in, those legitimate NGOs whose integrity and financial viability might otherwise be suspect. Organizations receiving a clean bill of financial health can attract more funding, proceed more effectively with their activities, and facilitate the general effectiveness of Russian civil society.

Indeed, despite all the gloom-and-doom advance reporting about registration procedures, the real (and unreported) story in Russia seems to be the rather undramatic drop in the number of Russian NGOs in the first full year following the introduction of Law #18 (3 percent).²⁰ Analysts searching for evidence that the gloomy predictions are coming true have grasped at straws to change the argument: NGOs, they say, may not close shop, but the supposedly high cost of registration has proved so burdensome that Russian NGOs must divert funds from their main missions and otherwise substitute expensive paperwork for substance.²¹ Again, we are not familiar with any real evidence to support this argument. The cost of registering an NGO in Russia is 2,000 rubles, or \$66, which is affordable for most NGOs and not higher than the cost of registering a business, as some analysts have charged.²² Furthermore, the alleged but unsubstantiated additional costs, such as the cost of hiring a lawyer in order to register, are not a real part of the experience for the average Russian NGO. Most NGOs get free registration advice or templates for registration from NGO resource centers that have sprung up throughout the country.²³

The phrase “intensified crackdown” is thus unsupported and unhelpful. It leads students of Russia away from contemplating whether there are legitimate reasons to scrutinize civil society activity. It also leads away from discovery and recognition of any potentially positive civil society developments. It is to such developments that we now turn our attention.

THE LEGISLATIVE INFRASTRUCTURE FOR PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

Although unmentioned in most western analyses of Russian politics, Russia now has a legislative base for mandating citizen participation in local governance. Federal Law #131-FZ on the “General Organizational Principles of Local Self-Government in the Russian Federation” allows Russian citizens to participate in decision making on “issues of local significance,” either directly or through local self-government bodies.²⁴ Many of the law’s key elements related to public participation in governance took effect on 1 January 2006.

Law #131 deserves to be part of the discussion when evaluating Russia’s progress toward or backsliding from democracy. It is not an anecdote but a factual legislative development. The design and implementation of the law should be evaluated critically in order to get a full understanding of the civil society component of Russia’s democratic development. The legislative framework of Law #131 represents a huge stride for Russia in recognizing the value of citizen participation in governance, especially for issues related to land use, housing development, and overall city planning, which are incredibly salient to the average Russian citizen.

Of course, there are also reasons for skepticism. The sticking point of Law #131 for many Russians is the difficulty of local self-financing to implement the

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law (Chapter 8, “The Economic Basis of Local Self-Government”). Moreover, the mechanisms for citizen participation, like public hearings and referenda, can easily be manipulated to produce a democratic veneer rather than a genuine process for eliciting public preferences. The legislative mandate does not automatically produce competent and committed local deputies who will seek to understand and address their constituents’ needs, nor does the legislative mandate automatically overcome a deep-seated aversion among Russians to civic and political activism. As in the United States, citizen participation in Russia depends

on the level of individual commitment to a particular issue, organizational capacity, and civic competence.

FUNDING FOR CIVIL SOCIETY

Another aspect of civil society development in Russia that flies below the western radar is the presence of government-financed grant competitions to support citizen driven projects. As recently as 1995, the Russian government provided no money at all to NGOs or social projects on a competitive basis. Any government funds that did go to NGOs went to those with close government con-

nections in non-transparent arrangements. Competitive funding was jump-started in 1996 by \$600,000 provided to the Siberian Civic Initiatives Support Center (SCISC) by USAID for small grants to Siberian NGOs. SCISC represents the first civil society development network in the former Soviet Union and is comprised of member civic organizations in eleven Russian regions. SCISC leveraged the opportunity presented by the 1996 funding to introduce local governments to competitive mechanisms for distributing money.

The next step was to stimulate domestic funding on a competitive basis for NGOs and other social projects. In 1998, SCISC offered to provide \$500 if Novosibirsk Oblast was willing to match that amount and conduct a competition together. This approach to mobilization of resources became known as a “consolidated budget competition” (CBC).²⁵ Since 2007, the amount of funding available for social projects has jumped enormously at both the Siberian regional and federal level. Novosibirsk Oblast and the city of Novosibirsk gave grants totaling 18 million rubles in 2007, and those grant pools have totaled approximately 35 million annually in the years since.²⁶ Krasnoyarsk Krai has been distributing amounts commensurate with Novosibirsk. More importantly, the Krai established the first region-wide system of “Territorial Commissions” to make information about grant opportunities accessible to all residents. The services offered by these Territorial Commissions include consultations on social project development and grant writing. In addition, experts based at these commissions have received training in the monitoring and evaluation of projects.²⁷

The first federal level open competition to support NGO projects came in 2006. It was initiated by the Russian Federation Public Chamber and distributed \$15 million to 600 NGOs. Since 2007, approximately 1.2 billion rubles (\$40-50 million) have been awarded annually to support thousands of projects in most subjects of the Russian Federation.²⁸ In January 2010, government funding to NGOs took an additional step forward with the State Duma approval of a bill to support “socially oriented NGOs,” including those focusing on charity, the environment, historical and cultural preservation, welfare assistance, and human rights.²⁹

Like Law #131 and other legislation, competitive grant competitions for citizen driven projects deserve to be part of the discussion when evaluating Russia’s progress toward or backsliding from democracy. The grant competitions are not anecdotes; they are large-scale, systematic developments that are subject to ongoing analysis by Russia’s Public Chamber and are readily available to outsiders for independent analysis through the Public Chamber’s annual report as well as through individual Russian NGOs that are monitoring the distribution of funds.

As with Law #131, the grant competitions should be evaluated critically. There are some obvious challenges to treating these competitions as indicators of civil

society development. A common western perception and fear is that funding will go only to civic organizations that present little threat to the Russian government, so that human rights organizations, adversarial environmental organizations, and organizations dedicated to monitoring elections or the progress of democracy would be unlikely candidates for funding. Another challenge is the risk of co-optation.

Again, we provide some balance to a skewed public discussion by offering some reasonable rebuttals. The suspicion that the most notoriously anti-administration groups would go unfunded or get co-opted has proven false.³⁰ The Moscow Helsinki Group, one of Russia's most well-known human rights organizations and outspoken critics of the Putin government, received a very large grant from the federal competition (2,545,000 rubles, or approximately \$100,000) for the purpose

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of creating access to effective rights defense. The Committee of Soldier's Mothers received 729,800 rubles, or approximately \$30,000, to defend the rights of draft age men, those serving in the army, and their parents.³¹ Given the mission and reputation of these and other recipients, their federal funding provides counterevidence to charges of biased competition and co-optation.

The convenient oversight or outright denial of the existence of funding to anti-administration groups delegitimizes claims that assessments of Russian civil society are honest and balanced. Such oversights and denials make it more difficult to distinguish true transgressions of the Russian government from unfounded anti-government rhetoric.³² Moreover, the oversights and denials are usually coupled with an imbalanced spotlight on the funding given to pro-administration groups. While criticism of these groups and their activities may be fair, ignoring government funding to the many other Russian civic groups is not. There is no systematic reason for dismissing developments among independent citizens and civic organizations simply because the government also funds groups that support it.

The worry that civic groups funded by government will be subject to co-optation is certainly legitimate, but the worry is also universal. American and other western NGOs are not exempt from the temptation. The better question is whether processes are in place to counter this potential problem.

When it comes to charges of co-optation, there are widely accepted double standards for Russia. For example, concern is expressed about limitations on foreign funding of Russian NGOs because foreign funding in Russia is supposedly a good development, worthy of encouragement, and mysteriously not prone toward co-

opting or otherwise influencing the funded group, yet such concern is completely reversed when it comes to Russian funding for Russian NGOs. Russian funding is supposedly a bad development worthy of criticism. Financial support from the Russian state “naturally limits what recipient groups can do.”³³ Rarely do we see mention of the fact that foreign donors may also limit what recipient groups can do or that foreign donors require mounds of paperwork and accountability from recipients for reasons that we usually deem fully justifiable, such as for feedback to U.S. lawmakers and the taxpaying public who want some say in how USAID funds are distributed in Russia.³⁴ There are no systematic reasons for the double standards. Steadfast Russia critics do not universally applaud foreign funding to civic groups in all countries and lament domestic funding. It would certainly be unusual to see articles in the United States praising Russian government financial support for American NGOs while expressing suspicion and criticism of American government support for American NGOs. The situations clearly differ, but to the extent that they differ, there must be clear, transparent and readily identifiable standards to explain why. Systematic guidelines should exist on how to assess civil society funding and co-optation in different countries, and systematic evidence should be gathered in accordance with these guidelines.

The alternative of completely avoiding funding by Russian local or federal government is not in the interest of civil society development, especially if the low level of resources otherwise available to most Russian citizens would prevent them from organizing. A larger problem than the risk of co-optation is that the total money available from government grant competitions, while impressive in absolute terms, is small relative to the size of the Russian population and its “Third Sector”, as Russians refer to their nonprofits.

The concern that government funding is too limited to have an impact has some merit but should be kept in perspective. Prior to recent developments, local or national government competitions to fund NGOs in Russia simply did not exist. Decisions to give money to NGOs even during the Yeltsin years were made behind closed doors, with most funding going to old Soviet organizations such as veterans’ groups, the Children’s Fund, and the Red Cross.³⁵ The positive trend in open and competitive financing counters the widely publicized negative trend in Russia’s democratic development and should be reported accordingly. Again, the competitions for NGO funding are not random anecdotes. They provide systematic data that could be systematically analyzed to understand civil society developments in Russia.

A final concern that might be less obvious to those unfamiliar with the grant competitions is the need for better policies and procedures to ensure equal opportunity, fairness, merit based decision making, and accountability, which would

in turn maximize the impact of the resources made available to civic groups. Complaints of Russian NGO representatives include: the uneven distribution of funding across Russia's territories; conflicts of interest between Public Chamber members, the foundations that conduct the competitions, and the NGO grant recipients; low quality projects; low trust in the foundations conducting the competitions; the absence of monitoring and evaluation; and insufficient federal action to increase openness and participation in the competitions.³⁶ Notably, these criticisms appear in the Public Chamber's own report, along with discussion of how to remedy the problems.³⁷ Balanced reporting on civil society developments in Russia should acknowledge such unprecedented self-criticism, while still holding

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the Public Chamber and the government accountable according to the standards they themselves are setting for improving the situation.

Examples of outcomes from grant competitions include a new playground and fountain in a rural community in Novosibirsk Oblast. This was achieved thanks to an Oblast grant to schoolchildren who saw the grant competition announcement on the internet and decided to design their dream playground and submit their application. Such accomplishments based on extraordinarily small amounts of money are

tempting to dismiss, but if we dismiss them we are applying a double standard for Russia by valuing anecdotes only when they are negative. Small accomplishments like the playground are improving life in some Russian communities and may even encourage Russians, especially young Russians, to learn habits of democratic citizenship and participation. The mission for assessments of Russian civil society is at least to allow for this possibility and to document civil society achievements, not just failures.

Finally, there may be symbolic merit in the grant competitions. For many Russians, especially activists, the grant competitions demonstrate increased government understanding of the importance of citizen participation. Citizens are not just passive recipients of government decisions; they serve on the grant committees.

PUBLIC CHAMBERS

In 2004, Putin proposed a Public Chamber to exercise civil control over law-enforcement bodies and act as a bridge between the authorities and the public. Passed into law, the Public Chamber has 126 members, forty-two selected by the president, forty-two representatives of public organizations, and forty-two repre-

sentatives of the regions. It meets at least twice per year in Moscow to discuss state initiatives to promote civil society. The creation of the Public Chamber at the federal level inspired the creation of similar chambers throughout Russia. As of August 2009, there were at least fifty-five regional Public Chambers, with more forming every year.³⁸

The federal Public Chamber is one civil society-related development that has been noticed by westerners and Moscow-based human rights activists and was greeted with harsh criticism even before the Chamber began its work. Critics argued that the Chamber would be “window-dressing to legitimize the government’s increasingly authoritarian policies.” It would be “a phantom, a harmful institution” and a “wax dummy” that would substitute for the existing civil society in Russia.³⁹ While skepticism toward government can be useful and indeed is part of the mission of civil society, skepticism about the Public Chamber has sounded more like wishing for failure and leaving no room for the possibility that the Russian government may sincerely value recommendations from its citizens.⁴⁰

In a survey conducted by the SCISC of forty-three organizations participating in the 2005 Novosibirsk NGO fair (including human rights, ecology, disabled, youth parliaments, AIDS, breast cancer, pensioner rights, soldiers and veterans rights, small town school based groups, and community organizations), the general sentiment seemed to be, “Let’s try this, we can always walk out.” Asked if they would participate in the Public Chamber if invited, 60 percent said yes, 16 percent said no, with the remaining uncertain. Asked to choose between whether the Public Chamber is “a chance for NGOs to represent the interests of Russian citizens and participate in the process of governing the country” or “a mechanism for the government to control NGOs,” the responses were 65 percent to 19 percent in favor of the more hopeful response. Among the skeptical NGO representatives, some of them said they would still be willing to participate if invited.

Five years later, the question should now be: How have the Public Chambers fulfilled their mission of serving as a bridge between the authorities and the public? With the notable exceptions of Evans and Richter, little serious interest has been taken in researching this question, let alone conducting systematic studies of Russian activists who have served on the chambers.⁴¹ Anecdotal evidence suggests that there are mixed results. The challenge seems to be in getting the regions to select true grassroots civil society activists to serve as representatives, but the challenge is sometimes overcome, and some true activists are serving.⁴² Their experiences should be part of the record in assessing Russian civil society and democracy.

The Public Chamber itself is attempting to create such a record and obtain systematic data on civil society through an annual “Status of Civil Society Report”,

now in its third year. For 2008, the Chamber published not only many statistics and analyses that have been ignored by critics in past years, but a new compilation of forty reports on “Empirical Research on Civil Society.”²⁴³ These reports were the result of outreach to Russia’s many independent NGOs and represent the work of experts on civil society from over twenty Russian regions. Titles include:

- » Establishment and Development of Civil Society Institutions in the North Caucasus
- » Monitoring the Rights of NGOs to Participate in Managing State Affairs
- » The Third Sector in the Volga Okrug: Status and Development Strategy
- » Analytical Report of the Russian Federation Public Chambers and Councils with Regard to Health Care, 2007-2008
- » Third Sector in the Russian Federation: Evaluating its Influence
- » Conditions for the Formation of Civil Society: Ranking the Russian Regions and Evaluating Their Potential Public Base
- » Relations Between the Non-Commercial Sector and the Executive Branch of Government in Samara Oblast in Solving Regional Social Problems: Positive Practices and Barriers on the Path to Effective Cooperation
- » RosRegistration at the End of an Era

These and the remainder of the forty titles, as well as the fifty-one titles in the 2009 report, demonstrate the independent empirical research available in Russia to students of Russian civil society. The reports present varied perspectives, including some that are very negative. For example, the last report listed above was written by well known human rights activists and presents critical statistics on the implementation of the NGO law. Inclusion of such criticism in Public Chamber documents that the Chamber itself makes available on the internet should be noted as part of Russia’s record on civil society developments, alongside a balanced reading of all 91 reports.

ASSESSING RUSSIAN CIVIL SOCIETY

Does any of this make a difference? It is one thing to legislate citizen involvement and offer public funding for civic initiatives, but how do we know whether the citizens actually get involved and whether their initiatives materialize? We do not know these answers because few scholars, journalists, and policy-makers are asking the questions.

Some omissions from the Russian record are astounding. The most notable is the “Baikal is More Valuable than Oil” Campaign. A plan by the oil company, Yukos, and then its successor, state-controlled Transneft, would have placed an oil

pipeline right near one of Russia's most treasured natural wonders, Lake Baikal, the world's largest freshwater lake and home to hundreds of unique species. Citizens and environmental activists voiced their concerns, held meetings, and organized a petition with tens of thousands of signatures to oppose the plan, which had the potential to cause irreversible environmental damage from an accidental oil spill in an area prone to seismic activity. Despite a potential billion-dollar cost to re-route the pipeline, Putin responded to these civic activities and the concerns they raised. He announced on 26 April 2006 that the pipeline would be re-routed north to reduce ecological risks. Notably, the response of Russian civic groups was more balanced than western reporting and reflected a "trust, but verify" approach. The spokesman for Greenpeace Russia called the outcome a "victory for the whole of civil society in Russia, not just the ecological movement," but activists did not disband and are now focused on monitoring the implementation of the new pipeline and ensuring that environmental considerations are still taken into account.⁴⁴

Between the big story of Baikal and the little story of the Novosibirsk playground are many instances of Russian citizens taking action and the government responding. Evidence from one of Russia's poorest regions, the Altai Republic, includes the story of a local activist who successfully lobbied to have native lands declared a national park and the story of a mother of a severely disabled child who first became an activist for disabilities rights, then a prominent civil society organizational leader, and then an elected candidate to the Republic Duma. In another case, a Kemerovo activist went to court and won possession of a building to house NGOs and other civil society organizations and has since served on the Public Chamber.⁴⁵ Most surprising of all, survivors of the 2004 siege on the school in Beslan—a provincial town that, like Altai, ranks low on all indicators of socioeconomic status that might traditionally predict political activism—have emerged as some of the most active citizens in Russia. They have formed political organizations to demand government accountability, organized peaceful demonstrations and public meetings, and talked with and petitioned political officials.⁴⁶

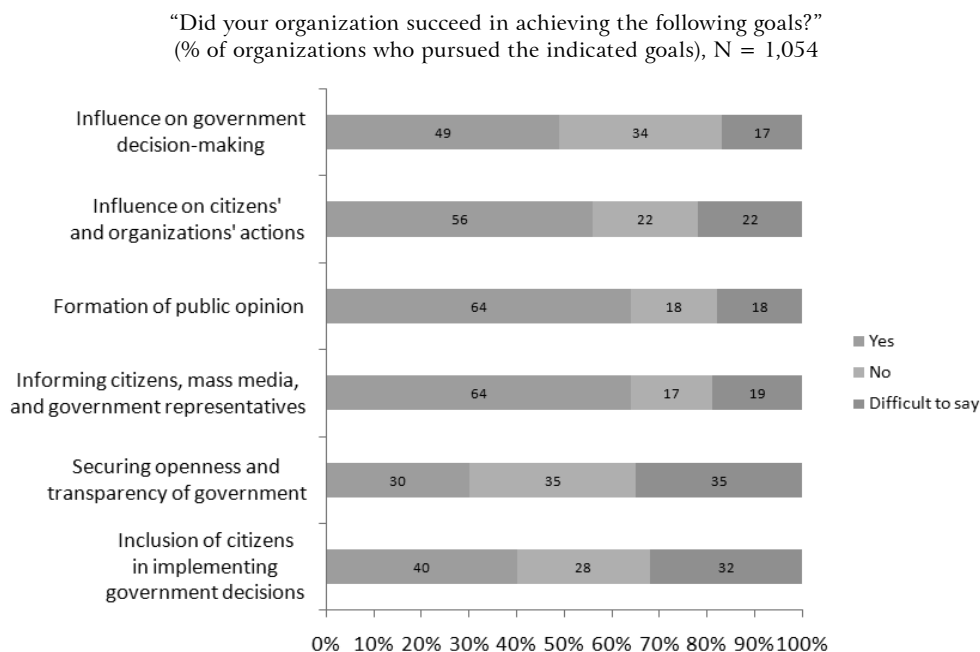
These are, of course, anecdotes, like the ones critiqued earlier. We are not claiming that the sum total of positive anecdotes negates the conventional wisdom about Russia's "rollback" in democracy. Instead, we are pressing for someone to do the addition, sum the anecdotes, and learn for certain how many Baikals, playgrounds, defended native lands, citizens-turned-policy-makers, and victims-

Between the big story of Baikal and the little story of the Novosibirsk playground are many instances of Russian citizens taking action.

turned-activists exist in Russia. We are pressing to leave open the possibility that there are many, and that public activism, and the government’s attitude toward it, may merit rethinking the placement of Russia in the rankings of the unfree.

We are also pressing analysts to familiarize themselves with the non-anecdotal evidence that already exists and to treat that data seriously. For example, an analyst seeking to learn whether Russian NGOs feel effective could quickly consult Figure 12 on pages 21-22 of the Public Chamber’s 2008 “Status of Civil Society Report.” The figure, reproduced below, shows mixed results for NGOs achieving their stated goals, from a high of 64 percent of NGO respondents who felt their organization influenced public opinion and provided information to citizens, media, and government representatives, to a low of 30 percent of NGO respondents who felt their organization secured government openness and transparency, with about half feeling their organization influenced government decision making and the actions of citizens and organizations. These complex findings should force us to move beyond the customary one dimensional approach to Russian civil society.

Figure 1: Meeting Organizational Goals




Source: Public Chamber 2008 Status of Civil Society Report, Figure 12.

All indicators may not point in the same direction and may suggest positive and negative developments, as well as shades of gray. For example, the minority of 30 percent of NGOs that report success in securing government openness and

transparency may be interpreted in a variety of ways, depending on whether the minority represents an increase or decrease from previous years and on prior expectations of whether any NGOs would have reported such success. The “Status of Civil Society Report” is joined by other domestic efforts at systematic data gathering on Russian civil society. For example, one new institution is the Center for the Study of Civil Society and the Not-For-Profit Sector at the State University—Higher School of Economics.⁴⁷ The Higher School of Economics is one of Russia’s foremost educational institutions and is increasingly recognized as a center for Russia’s leading specialists on civil society research.

Finally, we are pressing for western students of Russia not to allow their distaste for Putin to color the analysis of every dimension of the Russian political space. In the language of social science, these dimensions are independent variables. It is reasonable to be horrified at atrocities in Chechnya and still objectively report public activism and government responsiveness on other issues. It is reasonable to suspect electoral manipulation and still objectively report the creation of a new legislative base to support citizen participation in government. It is reasonable to worry that new NGO laws will curtail NGO activities and then report that the anticipated negative effects did not materialize whereas increased funding did.

Failing to treat each dimension of Russian politics independently leads to the current caricature of Russia that is increasingly common in western reports. The caricature is not helpful to scholars, policy-makers, journalists, and students of Russia who are trying to understand the true situation in the country, with all of its blemishes and--dare we allow for the possibility--beauty marks. The caricature is not helpful to Russian citizens either. Being told repeatedly that the country is sinking deeper and deeper into dictatorship where rights are being trounced and only one man and perhaps his inner circle have any influence would suggest that ordinary Russians surrender hope and not even attempt to voice their concerns or exert influence. Indeed, it suggests that a Russian grassroots activist must be naive or stupid to waste time in the political arena. There seems to be evidence to the contrary, and we challenge others to be open to the possibility. 

NOTES

¹ Sarah Lindemann-Komarova and Kira Grebennick, “Mechanisms for the Development and Support of Civil Society in the Siberian Network Regions,” (Moscow: Public Chamber of the Russian Federation, 2009), 94, <http://www.oprf.ru/files/Sbornik-2009.pdf>. Produced in partnership with Sarah Henderson and funded by the National Council for East European and Eurasian Research.

² Countries are scored on a scale of 1 to 7 with 1 being the best score and 7 being the worst.

³ Arch Puddington, “The 2007 Freedom House Survey: Is the Tide Turning?” *Journal of Democracy* 19, no. 2 (April 2008), 64. See also Freedom House Russia Reports for 2007, 2008, and 2009.

⁴ The *Moscow Times* reported that, “Russians enjoy the same level of freedom as citizens in Angola, Egypt, and Tajikistan, according to the latest annual report card from Freedom House,” in Alexander Osipovich, “Freedom is Downgraded from ‘Bad,’” *Moscow Times*, 17 January 2008. It also reported that “Human Rights Watch has called President Vladimir Putin a ‘repressive’ and ‘brutal’ leader on par with the leaders of Zimbabwe and Pakistan” and the organization made other comparisons between Russia and Bahrain, Jordan, Nigeria, Thailand, and China (“Rights Group Calls Putin a ‘Brutal’ Leader,” *Moscow Times*, 4 February 2008). See also Michael McFaul and Kathryn Stoner-Weiss, “The Myth of the Authoritarian Model: How Putin’s Crackdown Holds Russia Back,” *Foreign Affairs* 87, no. 1 (January/February 2008).

⁵ “Almost one-half of women who have experienced FGC live in Egypt or Ethiopia,” U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office on Women’s Health, <http://www.womenshealth.gov/faq/female-genital-cutting.cfm>; “Girls Killed for Going to School,” *Glamour*, 1 April 2008, <http://www.glamour.com/magazine/2008/04/afghanistan-girls-killed-for-going-to-school>; “Harassment forces Afghan girls out of school,” Reuters, 28 January 2009, <http://www.reuters.com/article/idUSTRE50S09V20090129>.

⁶ Throughout the 1990s, Russia consistently received the relatively good scores of 3 and 4 for political rights and civil liberties and an overall rating of “partly free”, (“Freedom in the World Comparative and Historical Data,” Freedom House, <http://www.freedomhouse.org/template.cfm?page=439>).

⁷ Thomas Carothers, “The Backlash Against Democracy Promotion,” *Foreign Affairs* 85, no. 2, (March/April 2006); “Choking on Bureaucracy: State Curbs on Independent Civil Society Activism,” Human Rights Watch, 19 February 2008, 20, 1(D); “An Uncivil Approach to Civil Society. Continuing State Curbs on Independent NGOs and Activists in Russia,” Human Rights Watch, 17 June 2009. Although see Elena Belokurova and Natalya Yargomskaya, “Do I posle grazhdanskogo foruma: grazhdanskoye obshestvo v regionakh Severo-Zapada [Before and After the Civic Forum: Civil Society in the Regions of Russian Northwest],” *Grazhdanskoye obshestvo I politicheskie protsessy v regionakh*. Working Paper, Moscow Carnegie Center, no. 3, 23-37, <http://www.carnegie.ru/ru/pubs/workpapers/72590.htm>; Alfred B. Evans Jr., Laura A. Henry, and Lisa McIntosh Sundstrom (eds.), *Russian Civil Society: A Critical Assessment* (Armonk, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe, 2005).

⁸ Natalia Bourjaily, “Some Issues Related to Russia’s New NGO Law,” *International Journal of Not-for-Profit Law* 8, no. 3 (May 2006); Michael P. Maxwell, “NGOs In Russia: Is the Recent Russian NGO Legislation the End of Civil Society in Russia?” *Tulane Journal of International and Comparative Law* 15, no. 1 (Winter 2006); Audrey Wood, “Enforcement of the NGO Law: A Deeper Look,” *The School of Russian and Asian Studies*, 29 October 2006, <http://www.sras.org/news2.phtml?m=780>; For an analysis of Russian Federation Law #18-FZ, see the Online Library of the International Center for Not-for-Profit Law, <http://www.ICNL.org/knowledge/library>.

⁹ Holly Cartner quoted in “Russia: Amended Law Threatens NGOs,” Human Rights Watch, 27 December 2005, <http://www.hrw.org/english/docs/2005/12/28/russia12349.htm>.

¹⁰ “Russia, 2007,” Freedom House Country Report, <http://www.freedomhouse.org/template.cfm?page=22&country=7258&year=2007>.

¹¹ Audrey Wood, “Enforcement of the NGO Law: A Deeper Look,” *The School of Russian and Asian Studies* website, 29 October 2006, available at www.sras.org/news2.phtml?m=780.

¹² The International Center for Not-for-Profit Law, “Analysis of the Impact of Recent Regulatory Reforms on Non-commercial Organizations and Public Associations in Russia,” December 2007, http://www.lawcs.ru/doc/law/NGO_and_CO_Comparative_Analysis_RF.doc; NGOs seeking to register can find resources at the Ministry of Justice, <http://www.minjust.ru/ru/activity/nko>.

¹³ See Law #134-FZ, Chapter 2, Article 7, point 4, <http://www.consultant.ru/online/base/?req=doc;base=law;n=65012>.

¹⁴ P.V. Chikov and M.A. Kanevskaya, “RosRegistration: The End of an Era,” *Empirical Research on Civil Society*, (Moscow: Public Chamber of the Russian Federation, 2008), 143-146, <http://www.oprf.ru/files/sbornikemp.pdf>.

¹⁵ Russian State Statistics Service (Rosstat), “Report on the Status of Civil Society,” (Moscow: Public Chamber of the Russian Federation), 42, <http://www.oprf.ru/files/Doklad-OPRF-2008.pdf>.

¹⁶ I.V. Mercianova and L.I. Jacobson, “Non-Governmental, Non-Commercial Organizations: Institutional Environment and the Effectiveness of their Work,” (Moscow: Publishing House Higher School of Economics, 2007), 158; see also V. Rimskii, “The Active Civic Involvement of Russia’s Citizens,” *Russian Social Science Review* 49, no. 4 (July-August 2008), 14-23, for supporting evidence that infrequent communication between civic organizations and ordinary citizens is a main problem; see also Marcia A. Weigle, “On the Road to the Civic Forum: State and Civil Society from Yeltsin

to Putin,” *Demokratizatsiya* (Spring 2002) for a discussion of the funding problems plaguing Russian NGOs since the 1990s, as well as Laura A. Henry, “Shaping Social Activism in Post-Soviet Russia: Leadership, Organizational Diversity, and Innovation,” *Post-Soviet Affairs* 22, no. 2 (April-June 2006) 99-124, who concludes that “[t]he emergence of the first generation of post-Soviet social organizations has been shaped by resource scarcity.”

¹⁷ Interviews with civil society organization leaders, (29-31 January 2008, Novosibirsk, Russia).

¹⁸ “Edelman Trust Barometer: The Ninth Global Opinion Leaders Study,” Edelman, 2008, http://www.edelman.com/trust/2008/TrustBarometer08_FINAL.pdf. Non-elite Russian citizens share the distrust of NGOs (Rimskii, 21).

¹⁹ Interview with Irina N. Rondik, “Initiative” NGO, Kemerovo, member of the Public Chamber RF 2007-2009, 29-31 January 2008, Novosibirsk, Russia.

²⁰ Anastasia Kornya and Ekaterina Kudashkina, “Expensive Altruism,” *Vedomosti*, no. 131 - 1905 (18 July 2007), <http://www.nkozakon.ru/publications/577>; According to Rosstat (Russian State Statistics Service), from 1 January 2007 to 1 January 2008 the number of registered NGOs decreased 3% from 675,600 to 655,400. Report on the Status of Civil Society, (Moscow: Public Chamber of the Russian Federation, 2008) 42, <http://www.oprf.ru/files/Doklad-OPRF-2008.pdf>. (In English: 40-1, http://www.oprf.ru/files/Doklad-OPRF-2008-ENGL_300409_2.pdf.)

²¹ Kornya and Kudashkina, “Expensive Altruism.”

²² The dollar estimate is based on the January 2010 exchange rate of 30 rubles to the dollar; *Ibid*.

²³ Among Russian organizations that offer consultation on registration, some examples can be found at <http://www.cip.nsk.su>, <http://www.init-kc.ru>, <http://www.portal-nko.ru>, and <http://www.zele-nyidom.narod.ru>. Specific registration information can be found at http://www.ngoschool.ru/ngo_law, <http://www.lawcs.ru>, and <http://www.minjust.ru/ru/activity/nko>.

²⁴ John Young and Gary Wilson, “The View from Below: Local Government and Putin’s Reforms,” *Europe-Asia Studies*, 59, 7, (November 2007). Russian Federation Federal Law #131-FZ on the “General Organizational Principles of Local Self-Government in the Russian Federation” (2003), 6 October, available at <http://www.rg.ru/2003/10/08/zakonsamouprav.html>; see also Novosibirsk City’s report on the Interregional Forum, “Local Self-Governance – School for Civic Activism,” (2008), 14 May, www.novo-sibirsk.ru/news/18037.

²⁵ Siberian Civic Initiatives Support Center, “Consolidated Budget,” available at http://www.cip.nsk.su/?mode=tech&page=dcpage_040516442.

²⁶ Interview with Lena Malitskaya, President Siberian Civic Initiatives Support Center, Novosibirsk, Russia, December 2009; The global economic crisis and constantly changing exchange rates make it difficult to offer a dollar value for these amounts. Roughly speaking, the combined grant competitions in Novosibirsk gave civic groups just under a million dollars in 2007 and well over a million dollars in 2008, 2009, and 2010.

²⁷ For an example of publicly available documents for an Oblast competition, see the announcement of the Novosibirsk Oblast Administration, available at www3.adm.nso.ru/ru/kon/vvodnaia.php. For a sense of the diversity of donors in different regions, see Kemerovo Public Organization Kuzbass Regional Center, “Initiative,” Map of Donor Activity, available at <http://www.init-kc.ru/?act=kda>.

²⁸ Public Chamber of the Russian Federation, “Competitions for Non-commercial Organizations 2008,” available at <http://www.oprf.ru/678/679>; Public Chamber of the Russian Federation Report on the Status of Civil Society, (Moscow, 2008), 55-6, available at <http://www.oprf.ru/files/Doklad-OPRF-2008.pdf>.

²⁹ Svetlana Kononova, “NGOs Will Receive State Support, But Is It Enough to Build a Free Civil Society,” *Russia Profile*, (25 January 2010), www.russiaprofile.org.

³⁰ James Richter, “Putin and the Public Chamber,” *Post-Soviet Affairs* 25, no.1 (January-March 2009), 58.

³¹ Report on the State of Civil Society in the Russian Federation, “The Public Chamber of the Russian Federation,” 2007, http://www.oprf.ru/files/doklad_-engl-verstka.pdf, p.64, footnote 48 http://www.nogo.ru/docs/nogo_list2.xls.

³² See, for example, the claim by Lev Ponomarev, leader of the For Human Rights movement and a member of the Solidarity opposition movement, that the Moscow Helsinki Group did not receive funding in Russia (“Russian Human Rights Activists Divided on Freedom House Latest Report,” *RIA-*

Novosti, 15 January, 2009).

³³ “Russia 2008,” Freedom House Country Report, available at <http://www.freedomhouse.org/template.cfm?page=22&year=2008&country=7475>.

³⁴ For a rich discussion on the effects of foreign funding on Russian civic organizations, see Sarah L. Henderson, *Building Democracy in Contemporary Russia: Western Support for Grassroots Organizations* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003).

³⁵ See Marcia Weigle. “On the Road to the Civic Forum: State and Civil Society from Yeltsin to Putin,” *Demokratizatsiya*, for examples of other improvements in civil society development from Yeltsin to Putin.

³⁶ For example, 89% of the almost \$7,500,000 increase in funding from the 2007 to 2008 competition went to organizations located in the Central Federal District where Moscow is located. See “Obrashcheniek Prezidentu” (“Appeal to the President”) signed by 511 NGOs in 43 Russian regions, available at <http://www.init-kc.ru/?act=otv>.

³⁷ “Report on the Status of Civil Society,” (Moscow: Public Chamber of the Russian Federation), 56-60, available at <http://www.oprf.ru/files/Doklad-OPRF-2008.pdf>.

³⁸ James Richter, “The Ministry of Civil Society?: The Public Chambers in the Regions,” *Problems of Post-Communism*, 56, no.6 (November-December 2009), 51.

³⁹ Robert Coalson, “Duma Gives Second Nod to Public Chamber Bill,” *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Newslines*, 18 February 2005, <http://www.rferl.org/newslines/2005/02/1-RUS/rus-180205.asp>; Nabi Abdullaev, “Public Chamber Left Toothless,” *Moscow Times*, 21 February 2005.

⁴⁰ For example, Jeremy Bransten, “Russia: New Public Chamber Criticized As ‘Smokescreen,’” *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 17 March 2005, http://www.rferl.org/features/features_Article.aspx?m=03&y=2005&id=3283F57C-12E6-48F8-ACF087A0F31ACCF8.

⁴¹ Alfred B. Evans, Jr, “The First Steps of Russia’s Public Chamber: Representation or Coordination?” *Demokratizatsiya*, 16, no. 4 (Fall 2008), 345-362; Richter, “Putin”; Richter, “The Ministry of Civil Society?”

⁴² Nikolay Petrov, “Where the State and Society Meet,” *Moscow Times*, 18 January 2006; Richter, “The Ministry of Civil Society?”

⁴³ “Empirical Research on Civil Society,” (Moscow: Public Chamber of the Russian Federation, 2008), available at <http://www.oprf.ru/ru/documents/1209/>. 2009 reports are also available.

⁴⁴ “Putin Orders Oil Pipeline Shifted,” *BBC News*, 26 April 2006, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/4945998.stm>.

⁴⁵ These and many other achievements of Siberian non-profit organizations can be found on the SCISC English language website, <http://cip.nsk.su/cgi-bin/index.fcgi?EN>; Interviews with Siberian NGO representatives were conducted by Alina Simone, June to August 2004, with the support of a David L. Boren Fellowship.

⁴⁶ Yana Voitova and Nabi Abdullaev, “Ossetia Ministers Fired After Angry Protest,” *Moscow Times*, 9 September 2004, 1, <http://www.themoscowtimes.com/stories/2004/09/09/004.html>; Robert Coalson, “Hostage-Crisis Victims’ Relatives Set Up Public Commission on Beslan,” *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Newslines* 8, no. 176 (15 September 2004); Madina Shavlokhov, Olga Allenova, and Alek Akhundov, “Beslan Banished the Prosecutor,” *Kommersant*, 5 November 2004, http://www.kommersant.com/tree.asp?rubric=0&node=1&doc_id=522631; For other examples of civic activism with varying degrees of success see Evans, Jr., 345-362.

⁴⁷ Information on the Laboratory for Civil Society Research of the State University—Higher School of Economics is available at <http://www.hse.ru/org/hse/civil/index.html> and <http://www.grans.hse.ru/>.