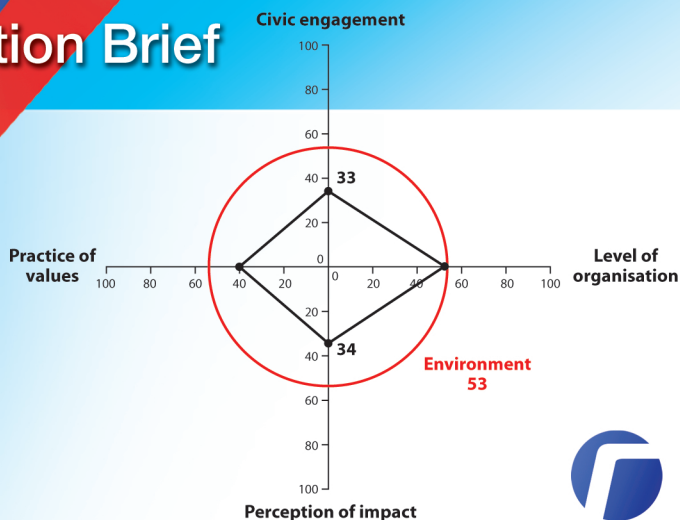


Civil society in modernising Russia

Policy Action Brief



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1. Background

In the year 2009 the Centre for Studies of Civil Society and the Non-for-Profit Sector of the National Research University Higher School of Economics joined the Civil Society Index (CSI) project led by CIVICUS: World Alliance for Citizen Participation.

Carried out in around 40 countries, the CSI is based on applied research about the state of civil society which aims to contribute new knowledge about civil society and its development. CIVICUS is undoubtedly one of the most authoritative platforms for international cooperation in the field of civil society research and development. The CSI project is based on principles of participation and includes a wide range of stakeholders, including active members of civil society, state employees, journalists and others. In implementing the project and disseminating the results, a real contribution can be made in achieving mutual understanding between various interested parties towards strengthening civil society.

The CSI assessment of civil society was carried out with respect to five key dimensions, with a total of 28 sub-dimensions which encompass 67 separate indicators. A wide range of research methods and analytical tools were used in this assessment, including three surveys, five case studies, focus group discussions and other consultation activities, as well as diverse secondary data sources. The major tools and elements of the CSI implementation at the national level include:

- Multiple surveys:
 - i) A **Population Survey**: measuring the scale of participation in civil society, surveying the views of 2,000 Russian citizens.
 - ii) An **Organisational Survey** measuring the institutional development of civil society, defining the characteristics of Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) based on reflection from 1,002 CSOs.
 - iii) An **External Perceptions Survey** measuring the perceptions that 136 stakeholders, experts and policy makers in key sectors outside of civil society have on civil society's impact.
- Tailored **case studies** which focus on issues of importance to the specific civil society country context.

- **Advisory Committee** meetings made up of civil society experts to advise on the project and its implementation at the country level

Following this in-depth research and the extensive collection of information, the findings were presented and debated at a **National Workshop**, which brought together a large group of civil society and non-civil society stakeholders, allowing interested parties to discuss and develop strategies for addressing identified priority issues.

This policy action brief summarises the basic conclusions of the CSI researches, with a focus on the identified strengths and weaknesses of Russian civil society and on the environment in which it develops, and presents policy-oriented recommendations on the strengthening of civil society in Russia flowing from the CSI findings.

2. Russian Civil Society: Challenges and Opportunities

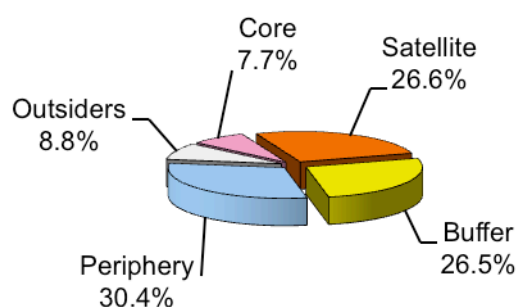
The definition of civil society¹ contains the concept of the basis of civil society, which refers to those people already engaging in social practices of civil society and people who are the focus of such engagement.² According to the research,³ the basis of Russian civil society makes up not less than 90% of the adult population and consists of four groups, depending on the extent of civic engagement.

¹ Within the framework of the CSI project, the functional CIVICUS definition of civil society is used. According to this definition, civil society is understood as the arena outside of family, state and market which is created by means of individual and collective activities and by organisations and establishments for advancing common interests.

² Mersiyanova, I V (2009): "Social base of Russian civil society", in: Social sciences and modern times, 4, 35-45.

³ The survey was carried out by CSCSNS in 2009. Mass population surveys were carried out using Geo Rating technology. Data was collected by the Public Opinion Foundation. The surveys were conducted in 68 constituent entities among people aged 18 and older. The sample size in each constituent entity was 500 respondents, totalling 34,500 respondents across Russia. In all constituent entities the same general principles of sample design were applied. A three-stage stratified sample of households was used: first administrative districts were selected, then communities, then households. Statistical error in each constituent entity does not exceed 5.5%. For overall results statistical error does not exceed 1%.

FIGURE 1: The basis of Russian civil society



The first group, called the ‘*core*’ of civil society, consists of 7.7% of adult Russians who reported the following: membership or engagement in activities of associations, civil initiatives and other non-state, non-commercial organisations; involvement in voluntary work or philanthropy; a readiness to unite with other people for joint actions where their ideas and interests coincide; and a certain level of knowledge of civil initiatives and organisations of civil society.

Around every fourth adult Russian (26.6%) belongs to the second group, called ‘*the satellite*’ – those who do not participate in CSO activities or civil initiatives, but who are ready to unite with others for joint actions, are engaged in charity in a broad sense, and are informed about CSOs and civil initiatives.

The third group represents the intermediate link between the core and the periphery: this ‘*buffer*’ group is made up of 26.5% of Russians. These people are potentially ready to unite for joint action, but do not really participate, are not engaged in private charity or voluntary work and are not well-informed about the work of existing organisations.

At the ‘*periphery*’ of the social base are 30.4% of adult Russians not ready to associate with others to achieve collective goals, but who still tend to engage in charitable activity and know about the existence and activities of CSOs.

Finally, the group of ‘*outsiders*’ includes 8.8% of those showing no sign of belonging to the above-described basis of civil society.

The opportunity for the development of Russian civil society lies with the expansion of the two core groups, by encouraging movement into these by members of the ‘*buffer*’ group.

The institutional structure of Russian civil society is represented by non-governmental, non-commercial organisations. According to the Russian Statistics Committee, the total number of non-governmental, non-commercial organisations in the Russian Federation as of 1 January 2009 was about 360,000. According to calculations, the share of functioning CSOs in the total number of officially registered organisations does not exceed 38% (Mersiyanova and Yakobson, 2007). Therefore, civil society in Russia is estimated to include approximately 136,000 active CSOs. The classification of CSO by activity contains 24 different types of groups.

The development of civil society in Russia is influenced by a number of factors, including state policy, the economy, communication practices and education levels.

State policy on civil society is represented by legal frameworks, the contribution of state resources, and the formation of channels of communication between the state and civil society. In the last 10 to 15 years fundamental changes in the attitude of the state to civil society have been observed. In many ways, this relationship remains contradictory and in essence, is really just being formed.

Since 2005, there has been a shift from state indifference toward selective support for a limited circle of organisations, and from suspicion of organisations receiving funds from abroad towards some attempts at constructive interaction. Among the most noticeable manifestations have been the creation of the Civic Chamber of the Russian Federation, the implementation of state-supported monitoring of the condition of civil society, the introduction of state grants for CSOs, revision of legislation regulating the activity of CSOs (cancelling unreasonable restrictions), and the inclusion of well-known human rights activists in the Presidential Council for Civil Society and Human Rights. These developments are partly motivated by desires to harness the resources of civil society to help solve Russia's social problems, and partly stem from the authorities' aspiration to continue building a legal democratic state. The state's changed approach has improved conditions for the development of civil society, while not resolving tensions that occur around political actions, such as human rights activities or advocacy on pressing social issues.

Economic factors contributing to the development of civil society in Russia include the gradual growth of individual and corporate philanthropic resources, new practices of corporate social responsibility and voluntary work. State support is available for civil society work in social arenas; but large specialised funds providing resources for civil

society activities, independent of the state or leading corporations, do not yet exist. Any further strengthening of the resource base of civil society will be closely connected with the general condition of the national economy, including the ability to modernise from a growth model based on raw materials extraction. The global economic crisis of 2008 and 2009 demonstrated the vulnerability of the resource base of Russian civil society.

The quality of *communicative practices* is improved, but it is still far away from an optimal level for the development of civil society. Noticeable changes were made in communications with public authorities, primarily due to the activity of the public chambers and councils under federal and regional authorities. Social advertising develops and application of internet technologies as a tool of network communications grows. At the same time, a weakness in horizontal communications of CSOs and network interaction among themselves is observed. Russian CSOs are perhaps making merely the first steps in developing regular communications with business organisations and institutional donors.

The high *education level* of the Russian population is potentially a factor in developing civil society. In higher education institutions there is professional training for CSOs, while the theory and practice of CSO-state interaction forms part of state and municipal government training programmes. However, considerable work needs to be done to develop moral citizenship, civil competence and engagement in practices of charity and voluntary work in the context of continuous education.

The work performed under the CSI leads to the identification of the following strengths of Russian civil society:

- Civil society scores relatively highly for its level of organisation, which suggests a good degree of institutional sustainability. The highest values within this dimension were for internal management, with a high percentage of organisations having a board of directors or other collective executive board.
- Most existing CSOs adhere to principles of democratic decision-making and have formal structures reflecting these principles.
- At critical junctures, civil society in Russia is able to organise itself to undertake joint action. For example, the CSO community mobilised to force important amendments to legislation on non-commercial organisations that had been criticised for discriminating against CSOs. Civic engagement was also

demonstrated during the summer forest fires of 2010, when many people helped to extinguish fires and provided assistance to victims. The monetisation of social benefits was also attended by organised protests in 2005.

- CSOs cooperate in dynamic ways, holding joint meetings, exchanging information, developing best practices and otherwise joining together to achieve results.
- The government has increasingly taken public pressure into account in solving policy problems.
- There is demand within society for CSOs to be empowered.

The perceived weaknesses of Russian civil society are as follows:

- Russian citizens do not typically participate in CSO activities. This is true both when it comes to working in CSOs and taking part in voluntary activities more broadly.
- CSOs tend to be active within the social field only.
- Although CSOs aim to conform to standards and be open, most do not publish their financial reports and do not have policies regulating such areas as personal conduct and environmental impact.
- The general impact of civil society in Russia is weak according both to CSOs themselves and external experts.
- Most CSOs do not engage with decision-making by authorities: most of those surveyed have never tried to influence policy-making.
- Corruption is a significant issue for CSOs. Only a minority have never encountered corruption in civil society.
- Civil society in Russia cannot therefore be said to be a conductor by which society's values reaches the elite or by which elite decisions feed back into society.
- Civil society in Russia is not advancing positive cultural attitudes; perceptions of levels of corruption, tolerance and trust among those involved in CSO activity do not differ from those who are not.
- The low level of trust in CSOs means civil society in Russia is often very informal, with informal voluntary work and unorganised donations.

- In contrast to businesses, civil society has weak relationships with the government, so politicians often consult business interests but not those of citizens.
- CSO funding is unstable. Most organisations cite membership fees as their main funding source; few have a diversified funding system. Many CSOs do not take advantage of the funding bodies that are ready to award grants. The main reason is a lack of training for CSO managers in fundraising skills.
- Notwithstanding the government's declared support for the role of CSOs in providing services to citizens, at a local level, dialogue with authorities is often difficult, and at higher levels cooperation is often not genuine.

3. Action Agenda

This section presents recommendations aimed at the further development of Russian civil society identified on the basis of the CSI study. The recommendations below are aimed at major groups of stakeholders capable of influencing required change. The recommendations are based on the assessment of the strengths and weaknesses and of the environment for Russian civil society.

Recommendations to CSOs

1. Build consensus on civil society's position on key aspects of development and unite in asserting basic political, humanitarian and general civil values. Use this solidarity to work towards a new level of cooperation with government authorities on the basis of equal partnership.
2. Develop processes of internal self-organisation and internal democracy.
3. Work towards a new level of citizen control over the activities of government bodies at all levels.
4. Contribute to the foundation of a permanent mechanism for public appraisal of important legislative acts.
5. Use more modern methods for informing supporters and partners. Learn how to present activities in interesting ways using the mass media and involving creative professionals as allies in order to promote the development of public service advertising.

6. Ensure maximum transparency in order to gain public trust in the social usefulness of CSO activity.
7. Develop strategic guidelines for the CSO community by consolidating available expert resources; develop a system for identifying best practices.
8. Extend the scope of CSO activity that is required to raise living standards, improve social well-being, increase educational levels, promote tolerance and provide legal training.
9. Develop long-term strategies of cooperation with socially-oriented business representatives.
10. Cooperate with secondary and higher education institutions to develop civil education of students and adults; offer students experience of participation in civil society activities; help integrate subjects of public civil education in curricula at all levels.

Recommendations to power-holding officials

1. Create conditions favourable to the development of a civil society able to have an impact on political and socio-economic processes. This includes developing a strategy for cooperation, passing the necessary legislation on the bases of cooperation, ensuring state/municipal funding for CSO programmes and monitoring and assessing programmes in partnership with CSOs.
2. Build confidence amongst and a favourable environment for CSOs as a basis for effective interaction and partnership for solving various social problems.
3. Establish a forum/network for interaction and feedback based on principles of dialogue. This could facilitate public initiatives and harness the intellectual, creative, and emotional energy of people and organisations.
4. Continue the joint process on improving and systematising legislation on CSOs.
5. Establish a permanent mechanism for the public and CSO experts to appraise socially important legislative acts.
6. Develop a grant competition mechanism for supporting socially important projects.
7. Use all means to support charitable work: providing resources, a grant competition mechanism, tax remissions, interaction with organisations, and mass media publicity.

8. Develop non-resource-intensive forms of government support for CSOs. For example, these could include providing information support to CSOs, developing a culture and mechanisms for governmental bodies to interact with CSOs, offering moral incentives, or including state awards.
9. Develop quality standards for CSO provision of social services to the population, especially where it concerns the lives and health of children, and enforce standards through licensing.
10. Use legislation to consolidate local self-government.
11. Involve CSOs in processes of modernisation, anti-corruption efforts, reform of law-enforcement bodies and the legal system, education, ecology and health protection, regional and national policy-making.

Recommendations to mass media

1. Provide regular coverage of social issues with the aim of motivating citizen participation in solving problems and behaving responsibly.
2. Promote public understanding of the vital roles played by CSOs, volunteers and active citizens in solving social issues.
3. Help promote best practices for CSO participation in providing social services and in sectoral communication.

Recommendations to business organisations and donor associations

1. Develop a three-way 'state-society-business' partnership to balance interests on labour relations, environmental protection and other key issues.
2. Help establish resource centres for supporting the development of institutions, information and educational programmes that will further develop the human resources of civil society.
3. In addition to providing charitable funds, allocate resources to finance the operating expenses of CSOs.
4. Support the development by CSOs and communities of long-term, target-oriented programmes in all spheres of activity, including the assertion of the fundamental rights and freedoms of citizens.

