

THE POLITICS OF CIVIC ORGANIZATION **The Karelian Republic in a Comparative Perspective**

Is Russia facing the emergence of modern civil society or the restoration of traditional, Russian, forms of social communication and political culture? In both the press and the scholarly discussion we constantly encounter these competing visions. Opinions on the matter are sharply divided and we are offered as many answers as different ways of interpreting the concepts of civil society and traditional community. Obviously, answering the question is too large a task for one presentation, for one man or for one seminar. I believe, however, that in the present situation even clarifying our standpoints and basic concepts is an aim important enough for further dialogue on the future of Russia.

In the following I note a few differentiations from the contemporary theoretical discussion on the concept of civil society and try to apply them in the analysis of civic organization in the Russian Karelia. I mainly utilize the results of the studies of Anatoli Tsygankov (presented here earlier today) and the information on civic organization published in the Finnish-language press in Karelia. I do not strive for a complete description of civic organization in Karelia but take up some aspects of the phenomenon which, in my mind, also have significance when considering the larger question of Russian civil society in a comparative perspective.

Civil Society - a two- or three-part framework

In 1989 Andrew Arato published a fierce polemic in *Praxis International* against John Keane and the way Keane utilized the concept of civil society in his analysis of "Soviet-type societies". The controversy had many aspects, theoretical, historical and political. In more than one sense the debate culminated in Arato's criticism of the way Keane "insisted on operating with a two-part state and civil society framework". (Arato 1989, 141)

According to Arato the simple demarcation between state and civil society was inherited from the English liberal tradition and stood open to neo-conservative utilization where pushing back the state merely meant freeing the "magic of the market place".¹ Arato himself spoke for a "three-part model" which separated the state, civil society and the economy. Instead of a dichotomous juxtaposition of state and civil society, he wanted to set the focus on the mediations between the three spheres. According to Arato this would allow the problem to be thematized within a "program of radical but self-limiting democracy." (Arato 1989, 141-144)

In their ambitious book *Civil Society and Political Theory* Arato and Joan Cohen have developed this argument further. They explore the roots of the concept of civil society, especially its constitution within the German (Hegelian) tradition, and argue strongly for its importance in constructing modern political theory. Without identifying with the normative side of their political theory, one can easily accept their criticism of bipolar state vs. society demarcations and theories of "new social movements" which depend on the division. (Cohen and Arato 1994, 33, 43-47, 69-82; Arato 1990, 31-36)

In the 1980s it was common in western social thinking to differentiate between traditional social movements, which were seen as part of the prevailing system (the state), and the new social movements, which were seen as representations of genuine voluntary association (civil society). These theories, adopted, e.g., by the "fundamentalists" of the green movement, oriented the western study of civil society towards so-called alternative movements, especially to peace movements, women's movements and nature conservation movements. According to recent critical appraisals this perspective led to a restricted view of politics and political organization and ignored the bulk of civic organization connected to the "life world", as well as to work and survival and free time and recreation. (Cohen and Arato 1994, 468-474, 510-523)

The tendency has also been visible in the discussion on civil society in Russia. The development of civil society has often been evaluated by the rise and fall of "new social movements", *neformaly* (See f.ex. *Neformalnaja Rossija*). It has been understood in the first place as a process strictly outside the field

of (party) politics and the state. In the case of Russia this is not, however, the most common type of non-problematic vision of the relationship between civil society and the state. More often, civic organization is reviewed exclusively as a segment of the political sphere and assessed as an indication of changes in the political system. Unlike in the West, it seems that in Russia the notion of civil society has become important in common political language, and curiously enough, to ideologists that represent various, even antagonistic, political ambitions. (See f.ex. Brovkin 1990; Kagarlitski 1992; Krasin 1993)

The anti-political as well as the thoroughly politicized concept of civil society can be seen as indications of the desire to rally popular support. In an important sense, we can speak of two sides of the same coin. Both the anti-political and the politicized vision of civic organization leave the mediations between civil society and the state unexplored.

In this situation an interesting direction for research into Russian civil society to take might begin by employing the tools of comparative analysis in the formation of modern politics and modern political culture. Following the German tradition and the concept of civil society formulated by Antonio Gramsci, recent studies in nationbuilding and political mobilization have focused on the relationship between civic organization and the fight for political hegemony (A most inspiring example is Hunt 1984). In the case of Russia, too, a new focus on the politics of civic organization might serve in formulating a more structured view to the mediations between the spheres of civil society and the state and provide new perspectives for the analysis of the political future of Russia.

The waves of civic organization in Karelia

Anatoly Tsygankov has presented a basic periodization of the new organizational activities that arose in the Karelian Republic since the beginning of *perestroika*. Tsygankov's principal perspective is that of political transformation. In his studies he primarily examines civic organization as an indication of changes in the political system. (Tsygankov 1991; Tsygankov 1995)

Tsygankov has distinguished three phases in the development of civil society: 1) the rise of the cultural clubs that broadened the arena of public discussion to political issues; 2) the heyday of the Popular Front of Karelia, the first organization to openly challenge the hegemony of the Communist Party; and 3) the birth of rival political parties, which marked the collapse of the old one-party system and culminated in the development "towards civil society". (Tsygankov 1995, 87-90)

The present stage is described by Tsygankov as the "age of exhausted exhilaration". According to Tsygankov up to the year 1990 many people had the conviction that they are able to influence the renewal of the society. They were, however, to again face disappointment. The arena for free discussion and diverse opinions that the clubs constituted in the heyday of *perestroika* was ruined by the logic of political struggle which demanded ideological homogeneity. The Popular Front, which represented the "foremost example of the participation of the masses in the political life of the republic", was fragmented because of ideological disagreements and political contradictions. Even though this opened way to openly political mobilization, the new parties could no longer mobilize people. According to Tsygankov political activity is now weaker than in 1989-1990 and still declining: "In Karelia a multi-party system, is more an example of theoretical thinking than of political reality." (Tsygankov 1995)

If instead of political participation we examine the whole field of civic organization, some features of Tsygankov's analysis appear in a different light. First, according to the local Finnish-language newspaper *Neuvosto-Karjala* (later *Karjalan Sanomat*) the rise of the few openly political discussion clubs was both preceded and accompanied by a broader wave of cultural societies, discussion clubs, youth organizations and sport clubs. From 1985 to 1989 over 100 voluntary associations were mentioned in *Neuvosto-Karjala*.² Even though these organizations did not openly contest the prevailing system in the sense the three political clubs mentioned by Tsygankov did, they, too, enlarged the area of public discussion and autonomous civic activity, and in this sense implemented new forms of civil society.

Secondly, the breakdown of the Soviet system did not only activate new political parties but also trade unions. From 1990 to 1994 *Karjalan Sanomat* mentioned 36 party units and 38 labour organizations. This seems to imply not only a redefinition of the relationship to the state but also the strong stimulus to civic organization provided by the economy. (In his pioneering book from the year

1991 Tsygankov does actually review the trade unions but primarily from the perspective of their political influence, see Tsygankov 1991, 84-114)

A third factor evident in the Finnish-language press is the significance of national and ethnic organization. From 1989 to 1994 28 different ethnic associations were cited in *Karjalan Sanomat*. Also Tsygankov emphasizes their political significance, but he seems to view their role mainly as an indication of the intensification of the struggle over political power and the decline of rational public debate and civic participation. (Tsygankov 1995, 90-91) The nationalistic organization could, however, embody a quite different feature of political mobilization: the constitution of modern political culture.

Conclusions: civil society and modern political culture

The ideologization of power, the challenging of the legitimation of power in the name of the people, is said to be a central factor in the creation of modern political culture. The breakthrough of the principle of voluntary association constituted a new arena for this ideological battle and transformed it into a contest between civic organizations over the right to represent the people. Nationalistic slogans proved to be most influential in the struggle for popular support. The propagation of national and ethnic solidarity did not, however, only indicate the building of "imagined communities", it also laid the groundwork for mass organization and in so doing broadened the scope of the political system outside the circles of the old elite.³ Can this trend be recognized in Karelia?

On basis of the information concerning civic organization in the Karelian Republic it is evident that since the first years of *perestroika* we can speak of the evolution of a modern civil society in Karelia. My opinion is not based so much on the rapid politization of civic organization and the great political influence some associations have had, but rather on the more invisible voluntary association connected to the everyday life of the citizenry, their subsistence and recreation. At least judging from the number of clubs and societies, this type of organization is not declining but still gradually growing.

Secondly, the organizations that played the most significant part in breaking down the Soviet system are not an adequate indication of the development of civil society. Their rise might also be seen as an example of segmentation and competition inside the old political system and among the old elite, the intelligentsia. Their decline is not necessarily a sign of political stagnation but could be seen as an indication of deeper change in the political culture.

In the elections of 1993 and 1995 the bulk of the political parties and associations could not gain the trust of the people because they were suspected of attempting to preserve the domination of the old elite under new names and slogans. The nationalistic organization and even the support given to nationalistic candidates in the elections does not necessarily indicate an irrational turn in politics but can be considered to be a conscious challenge to the old power structure in the name of the people.

From this perspective even the results of the latest parliamentary elections can be interpreted less pessimistically. The victory of the communists and nationalists does not necessarily exclusively imply a longing for Soviet times or even more archaic forms of social communication and national culture. Like the nationalists in the previous elections, the communists now represented a clear alternative to the new power structure and their victory can be seen as a sign of the strengthening of the democratic system in the sense of the formation of a more institutionalized opposition.

From the point of view of civic organization the shift of support from the nationalists to the communists suggest that the political challenge presented in the name of the people is taking on more organized forms. The communists were, after all, the one opposition grouping with the strongest organizational network - and not among the elite but the people. Of all the parties, they had the closest ties to the trade unions. Even though this alliance can in many cases locally represent the old power bases, as a whole it also indicates the strengthening of civil society in relation to the economy and the "market forces". In the same way, the most successful of the democratic opposition forces was the Jabloko-grouping, which is said to be the party most interested in building contacts to the organizations of civil society, especially to the new independent trade unions. Could it be that we are not witnessing the stagnation of Russian civil society but rather its strengthening in relation to both the state and the economy?

¹ This tendency is evident in many later analyses of civil society in Eastern Europe, see e.g. Kukathas, Lowell & Maley 1991.

² The information in the Finnish-language press in all probability represents only a minor part of the phenomenon.

³ I have problematized the relationship between civic organization and modern politics in my dissertation, see Liikanen 1995, 26-41, 69-71. The thematization leans primarily on Anderson 1983, Furet 1981, Hobsbawm 1990 and Hunt 1984.

Literature:

Anderson, Benedikt. *Imagined Communities. Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism.* Thetford 1983.

Arato, Andrew. *Civil Society, History and Socialism: Reply to John Keane.* – Praxis International, 1989.

Arato, Andrew. *Revolution, Civil Society and Democracy.* - Praxis International, 1990.

Brovkin, Vladimir. *Revolution from Below: Informal political associations in Russia 1988-1989.* - Soviet Studies, 1990.

Cohen, Jean L. & Andrew Arato. *Civil Society and Political Theory.* Massachusetts, 1994.

Furet, Francois. *Interpreting the French Revolution.* Malta, 1981.

Hobsbawm, E.J. *Nations and Nationalism since 1780. Programme, myth, reality.* Melksham, 1990.

Hunt, Lynn. *Politics, Culture and Class in the French Revolution.* London, 1984.

Kagarlitski, Boris. *Hajonnut monoliitti.* Helsinki, 1992.

Keane, John (ed.). *Civil Society and the State.* Guildford, 1988.

Keane, John. *Democracy and Civil Society.* London, 1988.

Krasin, Juri. *The Long Road to Democracy and Civil Society.* - Sociological Research, 1993.

Kukathas, Chandran, Lovell, David & Maley, William (eds.). *The Transition from Socialism. State and Civil Society in the USSR.* Cheshire, 1991.

Liikanen, Ilkka. *Fennomania ja kansa. Joukkojärjestäytymisen läpimurto ja Suomalaisen puolueen synty. Historiallisia tutkimuksia 191.* Jyväskylä, 1995.

Neformalnaja Rossija. O neformal'nyh politizirovannyh dvilenijah i gruppah v RSFSR (opyt spravotsnika). Moskva, Molodaja Gvardija.

Tsygankov, Anatoli. *K grazhdanskomu obshtshestvu.* Petrozavodsk, 1991.

Tsygankov, Anatoli. *Nuutuneen riemun aika.* - Carelia 4/95.