

**Victor Voronkov**

**Ethnic communities in a large city and the formation of civil society in Russia**

In this paper I would like to give my views on the specifics of the formation of civil society in a Russia undergoing the process of transformation. My basic assumption is that civil society in Russia undoubtedly exists at the moment. In connection with the variety of points of view on this subject, I would pay attention to the dynamics of public discussion on civil society in that country. If we consider revising the experience of Hungary or Poland, where this theme was extremely popular in the professional and political discussion in the 1980s, it is significant that this issue began to fade at the beginning of the 1990s. It is evident that the topicalness of the issue is closely connected with the context of changes taking place in society, and namely with the process of transformation in Eastern Europe and Russia. I would argue that the amount of debate about civil society is an indicator of its maturity. There is an inverse correlation: the less "civil society" is being discussed, the more developed it is.

The interest in this subject in Russia grew during the process of struggling for perestroika, and the height of interest was reached in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Initially, during the wave of protest mobilizing perestroika, the words "civil society" and "legal state" sounded like a ritual exorcism and were associated with a bright and achievable future. With a certain delay sociologists and political scientists followed publicists in theorising civil society. It was precisely the inclusion of the discussion in the context of the struggle against the political system that infused this discussion with a special mixture of highly politicised elements. As the state monopoly, the key obstacle to the formation of civil society, was being abolished the urgent public discussion on civil society gradually faded away. In my opinion, this change in the public and professional discourse is the most striking demonstration of the existence of civil society in Russia at the moment.

The history of the formation of civil society, or rather the most important period of this history - the period of perestroika - is thus far of greatest interest. It is important to analyze the way in which the interest in establishing associations independent of the state was becoming apparent, how the collective activities for implementing this interest were being organized and how the collective actors being formed were struggling against the system for the right to exist and to develop outside state control in the course of the last ten years.

According to the population census (1989), though about 10 percent of Petersburg inhabitants were registered as non-Russians, ethnic identity was of great importance for very few people. In the course of many decades the dominant ideology succeeded in creating a new theoretically "nationless" community - "the Soviet people". This sort of melting pot effect is especially noticeable in the large industrial cities of Russia. Prior to perestroika ethnic interests were scarcely mentioned and were not organized; this was not due chiefly to the threat of being prosecuted by the state, but was due to the "Soviet man" identity that excluded ethnic self-identification, which placed them far into the background.

In the cases where ethnic interest was visible, all of its organized forms were rigidly controlled by the state. However, one can note occasional attempts at self-organization on the part of individual activists in ethnic minorities, and even in the actions staged in petitioning the authorities concerning the free achievement of ethnic interests. On the whole, up through the mid-1980s the main part of this struggle was actually being held within the limits of the dissident movement.

On the one hand, civil society did not exist in the USSR, so far as there was no real freedom of association. It can also be proved by the fact that legal ethnic organizations did not even "think" of an independent existence, and with all their problems they only addressed State authority, which strove to control all spheres of public activities.

On the other hand, the elements of civil society as a sphere of organized activities independent of the state nevertheless existed either illegally or with the tacit approval of the authorities, in their conscious disregard of a part of the uncontrolled activities (e.g., a part of the unofficial shadow economy, the cultural underground), i.e. in those spheres where the authorities were powerless or their control was ineffective. In speaking of ethnic minorities, we know that there were numerous underground and semi-legal organizations with religious, cultural and even political orientations which functioned during pre-perestroika times - seminars, circles, mutual support groups, foundations organized as social networks - and were based on ethnicity.

However, even the formation of a powerful underground - the whole "second society" as we viewed it in Poland - does not permit us to speak of the existence of civil society. Certain elements of civil society were growing in the depths of the system; that is the most that we can assert apropos of this.

Studies carried out at the Institute for Independent Social Research in the field of social movements and formation of ethnic communities in St. Petersburg offer the possibility of describing the role of ethnic groups in the formation of civil society on the level of a large city. In this respect I would indicate three stages in the struggle for free conditions in the development of ethnic communities: pre-political, politicized and legal.

The first stage, the pre-political, lasted until 1989. It was the period when the struggle to achieve ethnic rights was considered semi-legal and could only indirectly be considered political. The existing network of ethnic societies was based on clandestine organizations. Official voluntary ethnic associations were rigidly controlled by the party-state and excluded any political demands from their activities.

The politicized stage was part and parcel of the protest cycle of perestroika. It reached its peak in 1988-1991, when the struggle for free development of ethnic communities was part of a general movement for destroying the system. The legal stage started in 1991, when ethnic communities and their organizations became the motor of the civil society developing in Russia.

Of special interest to the researcher is that period of the struggle when ethnic minorities sought the right to legalize their community life, including the institutionalization of ethnic movements in the new conditions of the developing structure of political opportunities which is often referred to as democratization.

The formation of civil society in Russia actually started with reform processes and the decreased repression of actions not sanctioned by the authorities. The years 1987-88 witnessed the birth of open struggle for the legalization of ethnic organizations in Leningrad. This struggle occurred within the framework of a unified democratic movement, which was the most significant resource of ethnic communities struggling to achieve their own aims [1]. Common interests of political protest at this stage gave activists for democracy the opportunity to temporarily combine the efforts of separate communities within the limits of a united organization of ethnic minorities (*Edinstvo* - Unity), which was struggling for the right of official registration for each community and the allocation of facilities for their use in public buildings.

The counter-actions of city authorities in response to the collective actions of the

movement demonstrate the obstacles to the formation of civil society. Gradually compromising in certain aspects of the struggle, the authorities tried to take revenge in others. This is especially noticeable in their reaction to the articulation of ethnic interests. When ignoring these interests became impossible and the issue of registration of ethnic communities could no longer be delayed, the authorities resorted to various methods aimed at maintaining control over the emerging organizations.

To understand the shape of the mobilization provided by the opportunities for and barriers to collective actions it is important to analyze the range of responses available to the authorities in regard to these initiatives, for example, "Zubatov's tactics", "Azef's tactics" and "Louis' tactics".

"Zubatov's tactics" (*Zubatovschina*) are employed by the authorities to manipulate and channel popular protest mobilization by establishing state-controlled organizations pretending to represent the interests of aggrieved groups. These tactics have been very common in the Russian historical past. I credit them to General Zubatov - one of the chiefs of the Moscow police at the beginning of this century. Zubatov clearly understood that it was impossible to stop the working-class movement. However, in order to control and lead the energy of the protest in the desired direction, he proposed that the authorities establish workers' organizations. In the course of perestroika, too, the Leningrad authorities established parallel "strikebreaker's" organizations. For this purpose the CPSU regional committees specially prepared experienced functionaries - who "luckily" had the necessary ethnicity inscribed in their passports. While delaying the registration of activist associations, the authorities urgently registered those established by them, and ensured them different privileges and resources.

"Azef's tactics" (*Azefovschina*) are named after the double agent who simultaneously worked for the militant Socialist-Revolutionary Party and the police in the early years of the 20th century. The perestroika authorities sent trained activists into the emerging organizations and at the same time promoted loyal individuals whom they could control to the leading posts.

The set of third tactics, reflecting the idea of "divide et impera", can be called "Louis tactics" (*loujevschina*). This political principle is sometimes ascribed to Louis XI, sometimes to Machiavelli, sometimes to Bismarck, though it goes probably back as far as Ancient Rome. Employing these tactics, the authorities initiated various conflicts inside associations and managed to create dissention. They provided support to those organizations which seemed to be loyal to the regime and alien to politics (e.g., folklore collectives, leisure clubs), and tried to do their best to discredit those which could not be controlled.

However, the success of the democratic movement in the city on the whole prevented the authorities from succeeding in the struggle for control of the ethnic organizations. Through 1991 more than 20 ethnic communities in the city were organized and registered in one way or another. Their further development, which had escaped direct control and meddling on the part of the authorities, has been taking place under conditions of a consolidating civil society.

The formation of ethnic communities is closely connected with the current transformation of Russian society. The transformation has favored the raising of new interests and demands that could be realized within communities. We can distinguish two social-psychological processes that contribute to the development of ethnic communities in present-day Russia: (1) searching for new life strategies and (2) identity construction.

In searching for new rational life strategies under conditions where previous strategies became ineffective people realize that belonging to an ethnic group in the current situation could be applied instrumentally as an important resource in crisis situations. Thus emerging ethnic organizations offer their members additional opportunities in the sphere of economic activities based on an ethnic division of labour, in promoting new work places within the community, developing contacts with the ethnic homeland, providing assistance to persons in diasporas on behalf of international organizations and information concerning the possibilities of emigration, utilizing ethnic networks of social support and the advantages of positive discrimination, etc.

On the other hand, the growing flow of refugees and migrants from the former national republics of the USSR, many of them coming to the large industrial city of St. Petersburg in search for work and housing stimulates the development of ethnic communities as an instrument for integrating the representatives of different cultures into a community alien to them.

Another social-psychological process promoting the development of ethnic communities is connected with the construction of new identities from the remnants of the destroyed habitual ones. For the most part, associations with the Soviet past and relevant identities lost their meanings, disappeared or underwent irreversible changes. When old associative structures in society stop differentiating it, ethnic codes become more important. In a period of rapid social changes we can, for instance, witness the development of radical social movements and nationalism. As for nationalism, it blocks the processes of modernization by supporting protectionism, and simultaneously hampers the development of civil society [2]. A remedy for this situation could be to promote conditions of multiple identification, where each person could identify him/herself with any kind of association, depending on different interests. Overlapping of identities hampers the development of all forms of radicalism, either in ideology or in collective action.

Finally I would like to note two peculiarities which demonstrate the difficulties of directly transferring the Western concept of civil society to Russia. On the one hand, the nationalism of the Russian nation is underdeveloped (unlike Eastern European states and post-Soviet countries) owing to a number of historical causes: the Russian nation did not have enough time to form. Not only Russian ethnic boundaries, but the very borders of the Russian Federation are still unclear. Russian identity is expressed faintly, and it has only an imperial character. On the other hand, the nationalism of ethnic minorities in Russian cities

has taken on a purely instrumental character in the conditions of searching for new life-strategies. Thus I argue that belonging to an ethnic group is only one of the opportunities which can be utilized together with others to help in the orientation process. The opportunities for multiple identification are an advantage for Russia on the path to developing its civil society.

The second peculiarity is determined by the discontinuity of Soviet and post-Soviet associative structures. The associations of Soviet society were set up by the state, rigidly controlled by it. We can regard these associations as imposed identities. The previous identities of Soviet Russia are disappearing. Thus a short period of embarrassment in society changed to satisfaction with the destruction of the former system of imposed identities and the development of a free option of "groups-of-us".

The above-mentioned specific features of the ethnic situation in present-day Russia reduce the factors impeding the development of civil society and allow us to optimistically appraise the perspectives for the development of civil society in Russia.

## **Notes**

1. An analysis of perestroika in the framework of the political process model is given in an article by Duka A., Kornev N., Voronkov V., Zdravomyslova E. Protest cycle of perestroika: The case of Leningrad. *International Sociology*, 1995, Vol. 10. March, pp. 83-99.

2. This thesis of Glaus Offe is to different extent true for the post-socialist East-European space but not for Russia, because of specific features of its ethnic-historical development. V.: Offe C. *Der Tunnel am Ender des Lichts. Erkundungen der Politischen Transformation im Neun Oster*. Frankfurt am Main/New York, Campus, 1994.

## **Literature**

Duka A., Kornev N., Voronkov V., Zdravomyslova E. "Protest cycle of perestroika: The case of Leningrad". *International Sociology*, 1995, Vol. 10, March, pp. 83-99.

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