

Preface

Is the emergence of a modern civil society in Russia a by-gone debate? It seems that the slogan of civil society - which in the heyday of Perestroika was a key concept to both communist reformers and anti-party opposition - has recently lost much of its political attraction. Similarly the scholarly speculation on possibilities of a Russian civil society - which was characteristic to the late 80s and early 90s - has for the time being come to a standstill. Russian political actors have turned to less abstract vocabulary and many of the western observers have frustrated in their efforts to understand the Russian society. In many cases the estimations on the possibilities of a modern civil society in Russia have been negative, and researchers have ended up maintaining the peculiarity of Russian society.

This volume wants to contest the one dimensional view which sees civil society as a western model impossible to be transplanted in Russia. The articles are based on papers presented at the seminar "Civil Society in the European North. Concept and Context from the Fall of Ancient Regime to the Birth of new Russia", which took place in St Petersburg on January 18-19 1996. The seminar, which was organized by the Centre for Independent Social Research (St. Petersburg) and the Karelian Institute (University of Joensuu, Finland), aimed at widening the scope of discussion on civil society in two ways. Firstly, the organizers wanted to question simplified model-thinking by examining the conceptual history of the term. The first session of the seminar aimed at establishing a comparative North European perspective on Russian civil society by illustrating what civil society has stood for in different time periods and in different North European contexts.

The second aim of the seminar was to concretize the often abstract discussion on Russian civil society by exchanging basic information on the forms of voluntary association in Northwest Russia. This part of the seminar utilized recent studies on St. Petersburg and the first results of the Finnish-Russian joint project The Formation of Civil Society in Russian Karelia which connects researchers from the Karelian Institute (University of Joensuu) and the Karelian Research Centre (Russian Academy of Science, Petrozavodsk). The papers lightened the phenomenon from different angles but revealed simultaneously the lack of comprehensive information on the formation of the sphere of collective action and public opinion during Perestroika and the Post-Soviet period. Consequently, it was decided to continue the work of the seminar in form of a researcher network and to strive for establishing a joint European research project studying civil society in Northwest Russia in a comparative European perspective. The publication of this volume is a first step in this direction and similarly an invitation to other scholars to broaden the East-West dialogue on the future of civil society in Russia.