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Managing Society: "Sovereign democracy" and Civil Society in Putin's Russia

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This paper explores the interplay between "sovereign democracy" and civil society in Putin's Russia, with a focus on the challenges of a vibrant civil society emergence.

While a vibrant civil society is largely viewed as a key component of a democratic society and a crucial instrument for political change, the Russian civil society organizations have been characterized by organizational weakness, and marginality in terms of their social base, financial assets and influence over policy making (Evans, 2011, p. 46).

Evans (2011) notes that this picture has much to do with the cultural legacy of the Soviet system with pervasive distrust of social organizations and even of the whole public sphere (p. 46). Indeed, it has not been uncommon for post-Soviet societies to perceive civic associations as threat to the power and stability of the state together with the conviction that the state bears the responsibility for the wellbeing of the Society. Meanwhile, the Putin regime has further reinforced such perceptions to thwart civic activism and prevent it from evolving into an issue-specific, value- driven and a robust civil society.

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In Russia, mistrust in NGOs is widespread. Only one third of the population trusts at least one sort of NGO, while only 8.9% trust civil society as a whole (Stewart and Dollbaum, 2017). The polling agency TsIRCON states that the share of people active in civil society has stagnated since 2009, while the attitude towards NGOs has deteriorated since then (Ibid).

In essence, mass participation and public involvement has played a negligible role in Russian politics since the break-up of the Soviet Union, with some minor exceptions, including the wave of mass anti-government protests in 2011–2012 (Gelman, 2015, p. 38).

Convinced that foreign interference was at the heart of the protests that had been mounted in major cities prior to his re-election, the Putin government and an acquiescent Duma set forth new legislation that required NGOs to turn down funding from abroad or else register as 'foreign agents' (Oliker, 2017). By eliminating this critical source of support, the Foreign Agents Law weakened a core compponent of civil society and provided a fertile ground for suppressing dissent and pluralism (Ibid).

The Kremlin's efforts at controlling te civil society has yielded networks of government-organized nongovernmental organizations (GONGOs) with close ties to state officials and dependent on state funding. As a result, various scholars now see civil society as being almost completely subordinated to the state, arguing that this "Russian-style" civil society, or civil society po-russki, gives the state "a dominant, directing and all-encompassing role with regard to civil society formation and development" (Bindman, 2015).

Notably, the ‘color revolutions’ in Russia’s neighborhood did not appear to ‘inspire’ the Russian activists by prompting them into action. Rather, the ‘color revolutions’, and especially the 2004 Orange Revolution in Ukraine, served as a wake-up call for Putin’s regime and prompted the Kremlin into taking all possible counter-revolutionary measures. The result was the emergence of a mobilizational authoritarian regime during Putin's second term (Hovarth, 2011).

To thwart the perceived color revolution threat, Russian authorities adopted strategies that combined a political, administrative, and intellectual assault on the opposition and Western ideas of democracy promotion (Finkel and Brudny, 2012, p. 15).

An integral part of this assault was, first, an attempt to create a mass youth movement, Nashi, as a counterweight to the various youth movements that were the driving forces behind the ‘color revolutions’ in Serbia, Georgia and Ukraine. Nashi, the independent youth democratic anti-fascist movement emerged in 2005 as a pro-regime support group. Some observers read it as Putin’s Russia’s one of the most controversial projects, with its mass actions and youth in uniforms evoking memories of the Soviet Komsomol (Hemment, 2015, p. 73).

While pretending to be an independent youth movement, Nashi was state-run, with inherently anti-Western and anti-liberal ideas. Nashi was claiming to adhere to seemingly incompatible values, combining the elements of democratic discourse and global youth culture with nationalism and “moral framework” of the Russian Orthodox Church (Hemment, 2015,

pp. 72-73). Even though Nashi's priorities would considerably change over time in response to Kremlin's shifting priorities, it did not cross the line of a pro-regime counter-revolutionary movement, aimed at filling the public space with nationalism and loyalty to the regime.

As a result, Nashi would passionately support the Putin's regime, not least through countering anti-Putin opposition demonstrations in Moscow in December 2011 (Atwal and Bacon, 2011).

Not surprisingly, Nashi would be widely regarded as evidence of an anti-democratic backlash and as confirmation of Russia's resurgent authoritarianism (Hemment, 2012, p. 234). That said, Nashi had nothing to do with a democratic civil society and served as a tool for controlling public space and countering the opposition (p. 234).

There is a broad consensus, that Russia's nationalism has been shaped by a reaction to the West as Other, and by the Russian elite's interpretation of the West's efforts to contain, marginalize, and weaken Russia (Ziegler, 2016). In effect the Kremlin has consistently strived to delegitimize the idea of liberal democracy itself, labelling it subversive and alien to the Russian national character (Finkel and Brudny, 2012, p. 15).

Putin has tended to contend that the ideology underpinning Western democracies for decades has "outlived its purpose". Thus, "the liberal idea has become obsolete. It has come into conflict with the interests of the overwhelming majority of the population" (Putin, 2019).

Ironically, liberal democracy has been reduced to the acceptance of homosexual rights, hailed by the Russian president as a "genderless and fruitless tolerance" that allows "good and evil" to be valued as equal (Putin, 2013).

Essentially, the West and particularly Europe have been regarded as a purely LGBT-promoting communities that endanger national identities and traditional values in the post-Soviet countries and beyond. In Putin's words the liberals have been attempting to dictate anything to anyone, thus overshadowing the culture, traditions and traditional family values of millions of people making up the core population (Putin, 2019).

Therefore, Putin has positioned Russia as a counter-hegemonic force opposed to the West's "crackdown" on conservative values and even world's last bastion of traditional values, characterized by its rejection of revolutions, homosexuality, and feminism (Orlova, 2018, pp. 63-65).

This rhetoric goes into the heart of political homophobia, that is viewed as "a purposeful [strategy], especially as practiced by state actors; as embedded in the scapegoating of an "other" that drives processes of state building and retrenchment; as the product of transnational influence-peddling and alliances; and as integrated into questions of collective identity and the complicated legacies of colonialism. Specifically, we target the overt deployment of homophobia in political rhetoric and policy as a remarkably similar and increasingly modular phenomenon across a wide range of cases" (Bosia and Weiss, 2013).

Apart from encouraging homophobia, Putin's political homophobia has led to further misrepresentation of liberal democracy - often contrasted with Russian "sovereign democracy." Remarkably, the narratives that underpin Putin's discourse have proven popular with the Russian population. According to a survey conducted by the state-run Russian

Public Opinion Research Centre, nearly two-thirds of Russians believe that homosexuals are conspiring to subvert the country's traditional values (Terzyan, 2020). Moreover, they believe in the existence of an organization that strives to destroy Russian spiritual values through imposing radical minority norms on the country's majority (Ibid).

Such perceptions allowed Putin to strengthen his "strongman" image, with the president not allowing the Western liberals to weaken Russia. This rhetoric is not uncommon in authoritarian regimes, where leaders seek to strengthen their popularity by exploiting nationalism, exaggerating external threats, and manipulating the media.

The necessity of standing up to the West has served as a convenient pretext to suppress dissent and pluralism across the country by labelling civic and opposition activists as "anti-Russian spies," "foreign agents" or "traitors," who are involved in "Western conspiracies" (Duacé, 2015). Moreover, the Russian government passed several laws aimed at shrinking the public space by stigmatizing the core of the liberal-reform movement as "foreign agents" fighting against traditional Russian values (Wilkinson, 2014).

Overall, Putin has tended to undermine the very idea of political opposition, by implicitly representing it as an anti-state force that causes instability, rife with devastation. Putin and other officials have made frequent references to 'fifth columns' and 'national traitors' within Russia, creating a besieged fortress mentality that sharpens divisions between those supporting the Kremlin and those in opposition (Ziegler, 2016). Meanwhile, individuals prominent in the nationalist opposition movement have been singled out as traitors. Namely, in response to a question about prominent opposition figure Alexei Navalny, Putin stated that Russians "do

not want second edition of today's Ukraine for Russia" (Putin, 2017). Meanwhile, the Russian president would frame the Maidan Revolution as a sign of "fascism revival," asserting that those who stood behind the latest events in Ukraine are nationalists, neo-Nazis, Russophobes, and anti-Semites (Putin, 2014).

Such examples would help point to the hypothetical future of a strong opposition, that would soon or late strive to stage a devastating revolution. It turns out that considerable part of Russian population tends to share Putin's stances opposition. Remarkably, a Levada-Centre survey on the necessity of political opposition found that 54 percent of respondents thought Russia needed one, while a quarter disagreed with such ideas (Levada, 2016). Reasons given by the second group against the concept of political opposition ranged from concerns regarding internal divisions to its perceived detrimental effects on the country's general stability (Levada, 2016).

Overall, respondents possessed largely negative and pessimistic understandings of the official opposition in Russia, describing it as weak, marginalized, fragmented and even a 'dying species.

Even a quick glance of the Duma presents an unfavorable picture of a fragmented opposition, divided by communist, nationalist, and liberal ideologies. Ironically, only a shared distrust by the public appears to unite these groups, with respondents often associating the parliamentary opposition with terms such as "fake opposition", "rubber stamp opposition" and even "pro-regime" (Terzyan, 2020). Thus, it comes as

no surprise, that at this point there seems to be no considerable hindrance to Putin's plan to stay in office.

In conclusion, to shield itself from a vibrant civil society and mass mobilization, the Putin's regime resorted to tightening its grip on the public space and controlling public narratives on politically sensitive issues. Along with filling the public space with fake democratic movements, such as Nashi, the Kremlin has sought to delegitimize the very ideas of liberal democracy, labelling them alien to the Russian national character. In effect, there has been little to no room for a vibrant civil society advancement in Putin's Russia.

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