

An Assessment of Russian Civil Society (2005)

CIVICUS CIVIL SOCIETY INDEX REPORT FOR
THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION

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CIVICUS Civil Society Index Short Assessment Tool (CSI-SAT)
An international action-research project coordinated by CIVICUS:
World Alliance for Citizen Participation

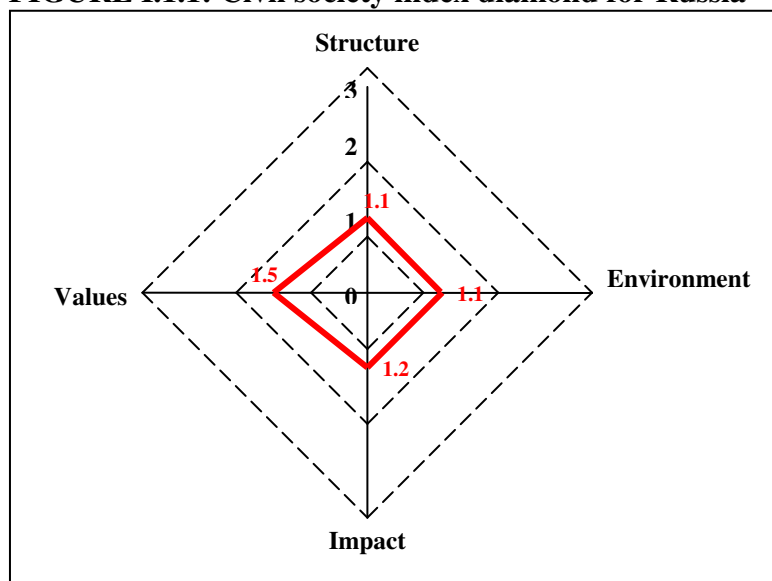
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This document summarises the results of the CIVICUS Civil Society Index Shortened Assessment Tool (CSI-SAT) application in the Russian Federation, carried out by the CSI implementing partner in Russia, the St. Petersburg Center for Humanities and Political Studies “Strategy” (“Strategy” Center). The project was carried out from June 2003 through December 2005 as part of the international Civil Society Index (CSI) project coordinated by CIVICUS: World Alliance for Citizen Participation. The CSI is a comprehensive needs assessment and action-planning tool for civil society actors at country level, which is currently being implemented in more than 50 countries around the world.

At the core of the project is the concept of civil society, which is defined as “an arena, situated for the most part outside family, state and market, at which people voluntarily interact for promotion of own and public interests and the common good”. This definition includes a large number of diverse organisations, including all voluntary organisations, professional bodies, trade unions, local informal and formal community and sports organisations. In Russia, the CSI assessed the state of civil society based on secondary information, which was compiled in a comprehensive draft report. Based on this report, the project’s Stakeholder Assessment Group (SAG) scored 70 indicators, which are grouped under four dimensions: structure, environment, values and impact. The indicators are a mix of qualitative and quantitative indicators, and each one is scores between 0 and 3. These are then averaged to give an overall score between 0 and 3 for the four key dimensions of civil society: structure, environment, values and impact. Together these four scores are used to plot the visual representation of civil society, the Civil Society Diamond.

THE FINDINGS

The Civil Society Diamond for Russia, shown in figure I.1.1, depicts a somewhat small civil society, operating in a relatively disabling environment. While civil society’s values receive the most positive assessment, its impact on politics and society is relatively weak. The findings indicate that Russian civil society is in the midst of a transition from a stage low development, which existed during Soviet times, to a well-developed stage under a democratic rule. It is important to note that the aggregated scores also present the average picture around the spacious country, while the situation with regards to civil society impact, environment, values and structure differs greatly from region to region, depending on political climate, social-cultural differences and other variables.

FIGURE I.1.1: Civil society index diamond for Russia

Looking at civil society's structure, the following points stand out. A substantial proportion of the population shows some involvement in civil society activity. However, this involvement remains limited and sporadic. Various studies carried out in different regions of Russia, in different times and in accordance with various methods, provide extremely contradictory results on the scale and magnitude of citizens' activism. There is also a critical gap, noted by many political scientists, between civic

attitudes and actual civic activism. For example, according to a population survey, while more than a quarter of Russians are willing to sign a petition, only 10% have actually done so.¹

Compared to individual forms of civic activism, the infrastructure of civil society is somewhat stronger. Communication and cooperation among Russian civil society organisations (CSOs), including cross-sectoral partnerships and international linkages, are sufficiently developed. There are plenty of cross-regional civil society networks and umbrella bodies in Russia, both formal long-term and temporary coalitions. According to the current report, all key social groups of the population are represented in CSOs' membership and leadership. CSOs are also rather evenly distributed throughout the country with some gaps appearing, but only in rural and remote areas. However, crucial challenges for improving civil society's structure remain, such as the limited technical and financial resources available to the sector.

The social and economic context does not represent any major obstacles to civil society's development, with the exception of a poor culture of trust within society, which should become a clear priority area for CSOs. However, in general, the political context has ample room for improvement. Civil liberties and press freedom need to be further developed and safeguarded. Similarly, the legislative environment poses a number of serious challenges for CSOs. According to expert studies, corruption is a major problem in Russia, as is the law enforcement, which have negative consequence for CSOs' operating environment.

Civil society efforts to promote the ideas of democracy, transparency and tolerance within society are clearly strengths of Russian CSOs. Russian civil society works to practice and promote values of human rights, transparency and accountability within society. Building social capital and pressing the state to provide for social needs is clearly the area well developed in Russian CSOs. However, CSOs should take sufficient care to observe the same values of democracy and due diligence principles in their own work.

¹ Christopher 2005: 554.

All of Russia's regions have legislative provisions for state-civil society dialogue and interaction, which is sufficiently developed. However, this dialogue does not result in a corresponding impact. Influencing policy process, including impact on the national (federal) budget process, impact on human rights and social policy (at the federal level) remains rather limited. Influence of civil society at the regional and local levels is somewhat more effective, but it varies a lot from region to region.

In most regions CSOs can freely exercise their right to criticise the government, appealing to the media and international organisations. Advocacy work in the social services sphere has been especially advanced at the regional level, where civil society has an influence on the state. However, CSOs work very little in the area of private sector accountability.

Educating and raising awareness is an important contribution of the Russian CSOs to society, so is building social capital. However, civil society efforts to empower women and marginalised groups of the population are an area where improvement is needed. Furthermore, CSOs activities in supporting livelihoods and poverty eradication are very limited. An increasing focus on these grassroots level activities should increase CSO membership and civic activism, since joint community activities, volunteer work and CSO membership remain rather low.

Civic activism is not likely to substantially grow in the near future, since abolished elections of regional governors and the limitation of the space for policy engagement by citizens does not contribute towards citizens' activism. Another challenge is the fact that the connection between civil society and the Russian population remains rather weak. Furthermore, civil society suffers from insufficient resources, first of all, but not exclusively, financial. Foreign foundations, which still remain a key donor group in Russia, are downsizing their presence in the country, while grant and charitable programs of Russian authorities and businesses are still to gain weight, scope and experience.