

Agency in Russia: The Case for a Maturing Civil Society

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Abstract: *This article argues that after nearly two decades of weakness, culminating in the failure of the Bolotnaia protest movement in 2012, Russian civil society has begun exhibiting signs of increasing efficacy and agency. The article analyzes several vectors of civil society growth: institutional strengthening of opposition movements; increased regional outreach and networking; and growing awareness of agency. Progress made along these vectors in the last five years, this article argues, signals the transition from a civil society exhibiting immature tendencies to one in the process of maturing.*

Introduction

Since the breakup of the Soviet Union, Russian civil society has presented researchers and journalists tracking it with nearly insurmountable challenges. Ultimately, these challenges come down to two basic questions: does a Russian civil society actually exist yet? And if so, how is it to be defined? What form can civil society take in a country where the government, whether Soviet or tsarist, has traditionally sought to dominate all spheres of life?

If in the context of Western democracies civil society is more or less taken for granted, the very existence of the concept throughout Russian history has constantly been in question. In part this uncertainty is due to the vague nature of the concept itself and the difficulty of defining, measuring, and assessing its role. What is civil society and what is community, is there a difference between the two in the Russian context, and does Russia really have either in the way these forms of social organization are understood in the West? Did the peasant commune in Russia constitute the beginning of civil