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Power and Public Chambers in the development of civil society in Russia



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ABSTRACT

Embodying a state vision of how civil society ought to function and be designed by the authorities, Public Chambers in Russia have been criticized as means of state control. This state dominance is the starting point in this article, which asks what room to manoeuvre a regional Public Chamber has. Drawing upon fieldwork this article examines how members and local observers of the Public Chamber give meaning to this activity. The analysis assesses the role of state dominance, discussion of routines and responses to local demands, and concludes that these incremental developments form civil society in Russia.

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1. Introduction

Consultative entities have in recent years become a fad in Russian state–society interaction (Belokurova, 2010b; Evans, 2008; Richter, 2009a,b; Richter and Ghodsee, 2009). One such organ is a Public Chamber. Initiated by President Vladimir Putin in 2004 and started up on the federal level in 2006, Public Chambers have spread to more than 60 of Russia's regions, and included in 2008 Murmansk region in northwest Russia.¹

The Public Chamber emerged in context of what is described as “large-scale recentralization of governance and the rise of authoritarian tendencies” (Gel'man and Ryzhenkov, 2011, p. 450). The Chamber embodies the Russian state's view of civil society as “a coherent, ordered space where individuals assist the state in the interest of the whole” (Richter, 2009a, p. 8). Political authorities have further sought to divide civil society organizations between those considered by the state apparatus as representing legitimate and those with illegitimate goals and activities (Evans, 2008, p. 355). In this context, Public Chambers are seen to serve a purpose of “managing society” (Richter, 2009b, p. 61). Through a network of Chambers from the federal to the local level, channels of communication are established that allow the centre to “penetrate more deeply into regional organizations and use them as additional leverage against regional authorities” (Richter, 2009a, p. 8). This creates oversight and insight into the public sphere. In the literature therefore, Public Chambers are in sum assessed in a critical perspective. While generally accepting these conclusions about the state dominance vis-à-vis these entities, at least as an important aspect, the aim of this article is to supplement the analyses of Public Chambers and state–society relations in Russia by attending to how members and local observers of Public Chambers explain their activities and the role of the Public Chambers.

¹ Murmansk oblast is located in northwest Russia, bordering on Norway and Finland. The region is sparsely populated with roughly 800,000 inhabitants on an area twice the size of the Czech Republic with a population of 10 million people. Murmansk is the largest city with currently 350,000 inhabitants, compared to close to a million in the 1980s. Natural resources, for example, nickel and fish, and prospects of increasing oil and gas-exploration in the Barents Sea are central to the economic development in the region. Border trade with Norway is also contributing to the character of the region today.

Belokurova (2010b) notes that when alliances are formed between local political elites and NGOs, Public Chambers may serve as a resource (power) in political struggles. This situation may have an unintended side effect when new practices and habits of state–society interaction emerge. While admitting that the state dominates Public Chambers, this paper examines what experience members of Public Chambers have; what actually they do and how they make sense of their activities; how they interact with the state and other actors. Murmansk regional Public Chamber serves as a case study.² In the period of October 1–31, 2011 I conducted 29 interviews with current and former members of the Murmansk regional Public Chamber (15), representatives of civil society organizations that are not members of the Public Chamber (7), and individuals who may be described as commentators and observers of regional political affairs, including representatives of three political parties, regional administration, and journalists (7).³ The research attends to NGO representatives' and observers' own interpretation of their activity and examines the role of informality and networking, which are recognized as important to civil society development in Russia (Petro, 2001, 2004; Richter, 2009a).⁴ For example, Belokurova (2010a: p. 458) notes that in Russia civil society is understood as a partner of government in nation-building and as a force for domestic change. The experiences of the partnerships, such as Public Chambers, are therefore a key for understanding Russian political affairs and societal development. In this study of a regional Public Chamber and its ability to manoeuvre I attend to power relations, the role of state-dominance and alternative sources of power, for example, personal resources and skills.⁵ The analysis exposes how people involved in consultative bodies within a semi-authoritarian regime cope with the simultaneous possibilities and constraints on action.

I argue that it is necessary to examine the incremental development of Public Chambers, their local forms and historical trajectories. The study has shown that the members considered the involvement in Public Chamber as meaningful; and local observers also view the Chamber favourably and as an attractive place of social involvement. Critical assessment of the Public Chamber needs to be done and the perspectives of the members, for whom there is an intrinsic value in the Chamber as a state-initiated and legitimated platform should be taken into account. Members of the Chamber expressed personal satisfaction, but also awareness that a position in the Chamber gives leverage mainly as a starting point for policy initiation. They are well aware of the Chamber's structure that, on the one hand, enables them to influence the region's policies, but on the other hand, put on them constraints; and while they recognize an increased role of the Public Chamber, they also question that very role. This situation does not necessarily undermine legitimacy of the Chamber because it exposes the Chamber as an arena for debate about relations between the citizens and the state and between NGOs and the formal political sphere. Seen as a forum for debates and activities for regional NGOs, the Chamber must be understood in terms of the ability to frame issues as relevant to broader societal developments and democratization in Russia.

The article proceeds in three parts. Part one explains the [Emergence of Public Chambers in Russia](#) and identifies the position of this institution in context of Russian. Part two describes main characteristics of [The Public Chamber in Murmansk](#) and analyses the interviews with members and observers of this regional Chamber by attending to the role of state-dominance, description of activities and assessment of legitimacy. The third part, the [Conclusion](#), provides a summary of the insights into workings of the Murmansk Public Chamber and its opportunities and constrains.

2. Emergence of Public Chambers in Russia

When President Vladimir Putin called for the establishment of Public Chambers in 2004,⁶ the goal was to facilitate increased interaction between authorities and civil society by establishing a formal framework within which citizens could express their views and voice their suggestions. This state's impetus reflects an idea of civil society's participation in local affairs as an important indicator of a democratic and modern state. As a form of institutional renewal of state–society interaction this development of Public Chambers around the country can therefore be connected to the modernization agenda ascertained by President Dmitri Medvedev (2008–2012) in his “Go Russia!” speech before the Russian Federal Assembly in 2008.⁷ Public Chambers – initiated by the state and designed from above – are a component of the process aimed

² Public Chamber of the Murmansk region consists of 45 representatives of the regional and local non-governmental organizations. When I conducted interviews in Fall 2011, the Chamber was in its second 2-year convocation.

³ All interviews were conducted by the author in Russian. Using a list of topics as flexible guide to the interviews, I asked about their experiences obtained from working as members of the Chamber or from observing the members. During the interviews I regularly presented my interpretation of the interviewee's views in order to have them discussed, which is typical of reflectivist research methods. I also attended meetings of the Public Chamber, a seminar and observed the members' office hours (*priyem*), during which they receive citizens' complaints. I wrote a field diary, which together with interviews, participant observation, official documents and secondary literature constitute the sources.

⁴ See Suvi Salmenniemi for an application and discussion of such an approach to the study of civil society development and democratization in Russia (Salmenniemi, 2005, p. 736).

⁵ In this article I use quotes from the interviews to illustrate my points and these reflect understandings found in several of the interviews. These are interpretations and do not represent the official views of my interviewees, who are therefore kept anonymous.

⁶ The first time when President Putin called for establishment of the Public Chambers was in his speech given on September 13, 2004 (Richter, 2009a, p. 7). Other speeches by the president throughout 2005 are identified as relevant to the legitimation of the Chamber (Belokurova, 2010a, p. 462ff.).

⁷ Consultative organs already existed in many regions when Putin launched the idea of Public Chambers (Richter, 2009a, p. 13). Also, in 1994 the Presidential administration of Boris Yeltsin directed regional governors to set up social Chambers “to encourage dialogue between civic organizations and the local government” (Petro, 2001, p. 234). The development of Public Chambers may also be related to the Soviet system of “complaint-making”, and hence, as one of several institutions to which citizens in post-Soviet Russia could file complaints (Henry, 2012).

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