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Civil society development in Russia and Ukraine: Diverging paths

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ABSTRACT

The authors compare civil society development in Russia and Ukraine in recent years in terms of civil society's structure and relationships with the state and the broader society. They find major differences in 1) the treatment of civil society by state actors and 2) the level of trust placed in civil society by the population. They use these and other findings to assess civil society's ability to play economic, political and social roles as defined by Michael Edwards in *Civil Society* (Edwards, 2009) and discover important differences emerging with regard to the political and social roles.

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1. Introduction

As with many aspects of development in the post-Soviet space, in the field of civil society evolution a certain fragmentation of the region can be observed, with varying paths being taken by different countries. In the existing literature, a strong emphasis has been placed on the role of external actors in civil society development, in particular with regard to democracy promotion. While this is an important topic, it has often overshadowed attempts at a more comprehensive approach to civil society development. Such an approach, especially when it involves comparisons across countries, can help us to understand the nature of and reasons behind the above-mentioned fragmentation.

This article thus focuses on two cases of civil society development in the post-Soviet space: Russia and Ukraine.¹ While both have evolved under similar conditions related to the legacy of the Soviet Union, significant differences in the nature and degree of development have been manifested, for example, in the differing type and extent of protest behavior in the two countries. The aim of the article is to better understand where the similarities and differences in the developments lie and what this implies for the functions the two civil societies fulfill in their respective domestic contexts. This analysis can in turn serve as a useful building block for further investigation into the role civil society is capable of playing in democratization processes as well as the impact external support for civil society actors can have in the different country contexts.

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¹ The authors would like to emphasize that the bulk of the article was completed in 2014. Due to severe time constraints associated with the revisions, updates had to remain minimal.

2. Definitional and theoretical background

Since the term “civil society” regained prominence in the social sciences in the late 1980s, it has been notoriously difficult to define what exactly it comprises. To make the concept analytically useful and empirically manageable, many scholars have limited their analyses to formally registered non-governmental organizations (NGOs) (Howard, 2008). For the post-Soviet space, the literature on other forms of civic activities is much less abundant – despite the fact that students of post-Soviet societies point to the central role of informal networks in social life and political engagement since Soviet times (Sundstrom, 2006; Uhlin, 2006). Although such loose networks were recently discovered as a resource for successful protest mobilization (Gladarev and Lonkila, 2012), non-formal actors have not yet found their way into civil society literature to a satisfying degree.

Consequently, we argue for a broader definition of civil society. Rather than focusing on specific actors, we conceptualize civil society as an intermediary sphere that works as a transmission belt between society, business and the state (Edwards, 2009). Both formally registered organizations and informal, spontaneous coalitions of citizens can perform this task. In a first step (section two), we thus delineate activities that are associated with a viable civil society. We assume that the degree to which civil society is able to play these roles depends on the conditions under which it operates (Jakobson and Sanovich, 2010). Hence, in the empirical sections, we examine the respective environments in Russia and Ukraine. To this end, we explore the relationship between the state and civil society on the one hand and the relationship between society as a whole and civil society actors on the other. In other words, we do not only investigate the transmission belt itself but also its connections to the layers it is supposed to link.² We conclude by looking at whether and how civil society is able to fulfill the theoretically derived functions.

Much of the literature referred to below sees civil society as a cornerstone in a functioning (liberal) democracy, or as a necessary condition for consolidating democratic institutions (Cohen and Arato, 1992). Whereas we do not categorically differ from this standpoint, we try to take previous criticism of it into account by focusing on what civil society *does* instead of what it *is*. This serves to avoid a concept of civil society limited to formally registered voluntary organizations, and simultaneously helps to confine the content of the term to a manageable scope. This section is therefore devoted to the roles that civil society plays – whether through voluntary organizations, informal neighborhood committees or digital networks of committed citizens. The work of Edwards (2009) serves as a starting point.

The **economic** role focuses on civil society's capacity to provide services to citizens, contributing to their welfare and ensuring social transfers “where states and markets are weak” (Edwards, 2009, p.13). According to Edwards, this role also comprises the spread of social values and efforts in advocating “social economics” that fuse “market efficiency with cooperative values” (Edwards, 2009, p.14). One does not have to follow Edwards down this normative path in order to recognize the fact that civil society organizations (and, as we shall see, informal groupings) indeed play a strong and growing role in service provision across many cultures (Anheier, 2009; Salamon et al., 2012). In this way they often take on functions usually performed by the state, which can be revealed through an examination of the state-civil society relationship.

The **social** role, as described by Edwards, comes very close to the Tocquevillian idea of civic organizations as “schools of democracy” (van der Meer and van Ingen, 2009). The argument is that voluntary association, whether in the form of an organization or not, creates inclusive social capital, that is, trust and the willingness to cooperate (Putnam, 2000). Anheier links the economic and the social role of civil society in pointing out that precisely the contribution of voluntary organizations to social service provision may serve to “revive or strengthen a sense of community and belonging and enhance civic mindedness and engagement” (Anheier, 2009). The degree to which this occurs can be determined by analyzing the relationship between civil society and the society at large. As Putnam points out in his classic *Making Democracy Work*, this sense of community in turn is seen as the basis for functioning democratic institutions (Putnam, 1994).

The **political** role of civil society is understood as careful monitoring of state and corporate actions and promoting “transparency, accountability and other aspects of ‘good governance’” (Edwards, 2009, p.15). Hence, playing its political role, civil society detects malfunctions in the political system or incumbents' misbehavior and collectively speaks out against them. This includes mobilizing opposition against authoritarian rule and against the abuse of state authority. But aside from keeping tabs on the state, civil society also provides channels for participation outside of elections. Likewise, Linz and Stepan stress that civil society should not be seen as opposed to the governance system, but as complementary to it (Linz and Stepan, 1996). From this perspective, civil society contributes to the functioning of the state. Here, as with the economic role, an examination of civil society-state relations reveals how much potential is available for fulfilling this political role.

How does civil society play these roles in a given country context? We assume that the environment that a state creates significantly shapes the role that civil society can play, both in its interactions with the state and beyond. If civil society is to provide policy advice, monitor state actions or contribute to the welfare system, in other words, if it seeks to play its political and economic roles, there must be an appropriate legal framework and meaningful communication channels in place. The same applies to civil society's relations with society at large: if civil society groups are supposed to nurture values of cooperation and commitment to civility, that is, perform their social role, these groups and actors have to be accepted by and

² We are aware that an investigation of civil society's conditions is incomplete without investigating its relationship to business. However, due to the lack of information available on the topic for the two cases under study, and particularly since in Russia it is considered marginal (Volkov, 2011), we decided not to devote a section to this aspect but rather to include some remarks in the section on civil society structure.

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