

CIVIL SOCIETY IN PUTIN'S RUSSIA



...Now you go and build me a state with the rule of law...

'I'm tired. In 1995, I was 20 or 21 years old at the time, I became quite impetuously socially active. Twenty-six years have passed now, more than half of my life. I'm still at it. But it's not getting better, it's only getting worse.'
A 46-year-old Muscovite.

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Summary

1. The current regime is steering towards the Chinese model: ample state control over the lives of its citizens, including restrictions on Internet access. It is, of course, always an open question whether and how the regime will maintain itself, but it is certain that confrontation with the rest of the world and control over the lives of its own citizens will increase rather than decrease in the medium term.
2. One swallow does not make a summer, but those who look closely sometimes see paradoxical forms of progress. Corona policy critics in Russia invoked the constitution. Being anti-Western is somewhat part of Russian identity, 'tolerance' is a kind of curse. But explicitly non-liberal, anti-Western Russians invoked human rights to protest vaccination in recent years.
3. Social rights have a more prominent function than human rights, let alone political rights. The Achilles' heel of the regime is the Russian welfare state, but if citizens feel somewhat protected socially and economically, they will tolerate a lot.
4. Polarization leads to more support for the government, this applies to both domestic and international polarization. Thinking in enemy terms is a routine act in everyday life, and the media reach of the government is large, whereas that of its critics is virtually zero. Those who resist firmly or who engage in serious criticism are almost certain to be misrepresented, such as Alexey Navalny, who is detained because he is accused of corruption, but who also carries a narrative of nationalism. So there are hardly any attractive heroes or people to admire.
5. *Civil society* organizations are increasingly banned. The work of these clubs is sometimes taken over by companies close to the state, which use it to raise their public profile. *Civil society* organizations working for children, pets or other explicitly non-political subjects manage to maintain themselves, either with explicit state support or with private donations from Russians.
6. The sense of isolation among Russians who do not like this government and who have all sorts of good reasons not to express themselves too firmly in public is large. There is an exodus of people who could function as a link to Europe. But there is a deep desire for contact. Prominent members of *civil society* organizations replied (anonymously) to the question what they would like to ask of the leaders of the European Union: less realpolitik, more cooperation, more openness, less military tension. They did not formulate concrete requests for help in terms of money but looked on a higher level for a better relationship between their country and the rest of the world. People yearn for an exchange of people and ideas.
7. Help is difficult because it can get organizations or people into trouble. But the story that the European Parliament wants to keep in touch with the local civil

society must be kept going, albeit explicitly in the context of the conversation about sanctions. What is left of Russian civil society is not very principled about those sanctions; the suggestion is made that helping NGOs is a good excuse to end sanctions. Anything that provides more room for dialogue, including cooperation through (international) companies, could be useful.

1. Foreword

Because of the war against Ukraine, relations with Russia are currently so strained that little or no consultation is possible, let alone an exchange of views.

How long this iron curtain will keep us apart is impossible to predict. In any case, it is not obvious that a dialogue will be resumed soon. The outlook for healing the fundamental rift with Russia is gloomy.

But at the same time let's not forget that recent history also offered periods of great hope. Two moments stand out. In the years immediately following the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and during the credit crisis of 2008, the idea that *civil society* would bring liberation in all sorts of ways was strongly held worldwide. Not the economy or the market, not the church or the state, but citizens working together would bring progress and democratic civilization. If that ideal lived somewhere, then surely in the (former) communist sphere of influence.

Could this ideal of a civil society, with its rule of law and plural democratic values, be made productive again at some point? And if so, how? That is what this report by Window on Russia is about. The report was largely written before the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The undertone would undoubtedly have become (even) more negative if the analysis had been conducted after February 24, 2022. But the need to think about alternatives has not diminished, on the contrary, it has become even bigger.

Menno Hurenkamp & Hubert Smeets

2. Why is civil society important?

What were the periods of hope related to civil society? The space that Solidarnosc captured in the Polish public domain in the early 1980s, the protests against the governments of East Germany and China, and the fall of the Berlin Wall in the late 1980s marked a first wave of hope. The Occupy protest against Wall Street influence, the election of Barack Obama as the first black president of the United States in 2008, and the Arab Spring of 2010 marked a second wave.

Although people in Eastern Europe were *sadder and wiser* by then, the ideal of self-organization came back powerfully in the aftermath of the financial crisis. Voluntary associations and disinterested aid would offer an alternative, not only to the calcified administration of the Central and Eastern European countries from the former ‘socialist camp,’ Russia itself and the Arab world, but also to the West itself, steeped in market thinking and consumerism. Democracy would be borne by citizens pursuing their ideals together, in concert, without violence, without profit. This ideal was the alternative both to the thoroughly corporate legacy of Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher, and to the authoritarian and dirigiste approach of socialism.

In order to delve into the meaning of this civil society for Russia, we must first delineate the way we look at it. What exactly is this *civil society*?

‘The space for the free association of people and the networks of family, faith, interests and ideology that fill this space,’ leading American philosopher Michael Walzer says.¹ From that civil society emanates the mutual trust between people, and also the willingness to participate in the democratic governance of society, or at least to oversee that public governance.

In the background of these and most other definitions, Alexis de Tocqueville, the nobleman who examined American democracy on behalf of the French government in the mid-19th century, is usually present. He found that in the U.S. – unlike in Europe, and in any case unlike in France – democracy was based strongly on citizens who maintained their own associations in their neighbourhoods, villages and cities. Nowadays we would rather say networks. Leaving terminology aside, what matters is that the American citizens seemed to be engaged in an almost permanent conversation about where public affairs should go. Slightly further in the background is the English philosopher John Locke, who at the end of the 17th century assumed that it was not God who bestowed the right to govern, but the mutual agreement between citizens to live in a civil society.

This ideal is not undisputed. Critics usually immediately raise the point that Hells Angels, skinheads or conspiracy-thinking antivaxxers also fall under the definition. Indeed, this civil society inevitably has a *dark side* as well: when people unite, it is not always to operate in a virtuous manner. This is certainly relevant in a Russian context.² The Orthodox Church

¹ Walzer, M (1990) The civil society argument; Kohler-Koch, B., & Quittkat, C. (2009). What is civil society and who represents civil society in the EU? Results of an online survey among civil society experts. *Policy and society*, 28(1), 11-22.

² Mudde, C. (2005). Civil society in post-communist Europe: Lessons from the ‘Dark Side’ (pp. 168-181). Routledge; Henry, L. & Sundstrom, L. M. (2016). Defining Civil Society. *Russian civil society: A critical assessment*, 323-326.

and (extreme) nationalist movements are also forms of association.

Those who prefer to keep this dark side completely out of the picture encounter a second dilemma of civil society, namely that the connotation of the term is heavily culturally determined. For example, it has a different connotation in the Netherlands than in France. What may sometimes sound somewhat conservative to Dutch ears also has something obvious about it: we probably have a civil society. As soon as we hear the term, we easily switch to the jargon of the polder model or pacification democracy – consultation, dialogue, negotiation, compromise. In a centralist, republican country like France, on the other hand, the term sounds rather suspect. Whoever starts talking about civil society there can be reproached for mocking the civil equality that the state propagates.

This caution applies a fortiori to Russia. There, most Western political terms, insofar as they are known at all, have been tainted by the failure of the ‘wild’ nineties. After all, the IMF then claimed to be bringing *democracy*, but it helped predatory capitalists make their move. And when one translates civil society into гражданское общество, chances are that Russians will think of one of the propaganda sessions that the government has increasingly organized in recent years. Older Russians, who may still be schooled in Marxism, may see civil society as a way for the bourgeoisie to maintain its power, or at least not as a liberating sphere.

A third dilemma is the question what *exactly* this civil society consists of. Do informal networks count, such as friendships, cooking, reading or running clubs, or jointly maintained websites? Or should only ‘real’ organizations, such as associations with members or foundations with a constituency, be considered relevant? Authoritative authors tend to lean towards the latter answer. They assume that, in order to maintain democracy, you have to meet people outside your own circle (‘bubble’) on a permanent basis.³ After all, otherwise you do not take the points of view of dissidents into account, and therefore, properly speaking, you do not learn how pluralistic democracy works. Anyone looking at Russia will be able to predict in advance that there will be little ‘Tocquevillian’ activity, because the practice of associational life did not lead a very meaningful existence either under the tsarist regime or under the communist regime. For this reason it is better to look also at informal clubs (of environmentalists, walkers, neighborhood kitchens).⁴ It is often at the kitchen tables that you can feel Russia’s democratic potential.

It is therefore not without reason that *non-governmental* organizations or *non-profit* organizations are also often mentioned. What is stressed above all is: no state, no market. That is what is important in this study, to keep in mind that *civil society* is always a beckoning perspective, not necessarily a description of facts, but also a representation of ideals – for some people of democratic values, for others of human or humanist values. It is then above all an alternative to revolution or to an *exit*, to rebellion or to leaving the

3 Howard, M. M. (2002). The weakness of postcommunist civil society. *Journal of democracy*, 13(1), 157-169; Putnam, R. D. (2000). *Bowling alone: America’s declining social capital*. Simon & Schuster, New York.

4 Sundstrom, L. M., & Henry, L. A. (2016). Russian civil society: Tensions and trajectories. In *Russian civil society: a critical assessment* (pp. 313-330). Routledge: New York.

country, whether or not in *innere Emigration*. When we speak here of civil society, it is also always about the possibilities for change on one's own terms, about citizens who improve their society through self-criticism, by having an eye for the weak in their environment.

The power of those ideals cannot be overestimated. It is not for nothing that the Russian government is doing its utmost to convince its own society and the world that it also cares about elections, about participation, about openness, and about dialogue. The underlying message of the political parties that do exist, of the opinion polls that are held, and of the various television channels that do exist, is that the government is there on behalf of the people and by the people. The Enlightenment ideal that as a society there is a high standard to meet may not yet have taken hold in the whole world, but it certainly has in Russia. It is only that the government is deploying this idea rather cynically. While that attitude needs to be closely monitored, we know that self-preservation and thinking in terms of spheres of influence ultimately guide it. There may be big surprises in the goals chosen by the government, but the motives have been stable for at least two decades.

Whether they will remain so is always a question in politics. Regime change can happen overnight.

That is why it is indeed relevant to know *how the population relates to civil society, and whether there are leads there for support or cooperation that might be useful, not now but in the near future.*

In this study, we use a lot of data collected with the Moscow-based research firm Levada Center to outline a perspective on civil society from the bottom up. Because we did our research primarily in 2020/2021, the views that emerge from this study are significantly marked by the corona pandemic. That crisis brought the relationships into sharp focus once more. Namely: the love-hate relationship of Russians to their state, the at times breathtaking institutional incapacity of their government, and the apparent apathy among the citizenry that this in turn results in.

3. A brief history. Four stages in the life of civil society

Has Russia ever known such a thing as a civil society? In a comprehensive study, the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, the scientific institute of the German Social Democratic SPD, gave a quasi-joking answer to this question. ‘Es gibt sie. Es gibt sie nicht. Es gibt sie. Es gibt sie nicht ...,’ they wrote in their report *Zivilgesellschaft und bürgerschaftliches Engagement in Russland*, published in 2010.⁵ After which the authors concluded that a civil society really did exist at the cutting edge of the first decade of the twenty-first century. That positive turn in 2010 was obvious. Interim pope Dmitry Medvedev was then president of Russia. Under his rule, civil society regained some air. Two years later, civil society was again squeezed. This is an illustration of the wave motion that has characterized civil society in Russia: a brief boom was often followed by a prolonged phase of repression. Until the early 21st century, four stages could be roughly distinguished.

In the late 18th century, the first beginnings of a civil society became visible. Czarina Catherine the Great explicitly supported the creation of public organizations that were intended to fill the gaps left by the state. Under her regime, well-known societies such as the Russian Geographical Society, the Free Economic Society, the Moscow Agricultural Society, the Russian Technical Society, and the Pirogov Association of Russian Doctors saw the light of day.

The second phase presented itself just under a century later, after the abolition of serfdom in 1861 and the other major reforms of the 1860s. The popular movements, which were emerging at this time of industrialization and capitalism, then radicalized, partly under the pressure of increasing repression. It was not until 1906, a year after the February Revolution of 1905, that legislation by Tsar Nicholas II led to some relief. An eruption of nearly five thousand civic associations was the result. After the October Revolution of 1917, the clock was turned back. During Soviet power, which lasted three-quarters of a century, all civic initiatives were nationalized and controlled by the central state. Only the Red Cross remained formally unaffected.

The glasnost unleashed by party leader Mikhail Gorbachev after 1985 was the beginning of the fourth phase. A perestroika was also initiated in Soviet sociology. Among other things, it led to the creation of the Center for Research on Public Opinion (VTsIOM). Under the auspices of sociologist Yuri Levada, VTsIOM began to systematically map out the *homo sovieticus*. Thanks to VTsIOM, people saw their own views reflected amidst the views of others. That recognition strengthened civil society.⁶ ‘The voice of the people is the eye of society,’ was Levada’s motto. One of the questions in the surveys was, ‘Has the influence of ordinary people on state affairs’ changed or not in the last year? A quarter of the respondents replied in 1989 that citizens’ influence had increased; 41 percent said nothing had changed.⁷

A characteristic feature was not only that the state provided space for all kinds of associations of citizens, but also that the government admitted all kinds of foreign donors

5 Lang, S., Bürsch, M., & Härtel, A. (2010). *Zivilgesellschaft und bürgerschaftliches Engagement in Russland*. Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, Referat Mittel-und Osteuropa.

6 Alexander, J. C. (2006). *The civil sphere*. Oxford University Press, p.88-89.

7 <http://www.agitclub.ru/gorby/soc/soziolog02.htm>

and non-governmental organizations to Russia. The establishment of the historical society Memorial seemed to be a watershed. Inspired by Memorial and others, the Soviet parliament passed a more liberal law on associations a year later. Civic organizations only had to register. President Boris Yeltsin continued on this path. The state increasingly refrained from intervening.

3.1 Vertical power

After the transfer of power to Vladimir Putin in 2000 and especially after the Rose Revolution in Georgia (2003) and the Orange Revolution in Ukraine (2004), this all changed. In 2006, the Duma passed a law to re-regulate civil society. NGOs now had to render (financial) accounts in a strictly formatted manner. Registration of an association or foundation became much more expensive and strict criteria applied to foreign NGOs. The Kremlin-critical parliamentarian Vladimir Ryzhkov sighed: ‘Setting up an NGO in Russia is more expensive than an oil company.’⁸

A year earlier, a new civil society body had been installed: the so-called Civil Society Chamber. The members of this new institution would be partly nominated by the recognized civil society organizations and partly appointed directly by the president. Based on data from the Bureau of Statistics (Rosstat), the Civil Society Chamber calculated in 2008 that some 655,000 nonprofit organizations were active in Russia. Those NGOs were paid for 50 percent by citizens, 15 percent by entrepreneurs, 11 percent by foreign donors and 24 percent by public funds. According to the Russian Helsinki Committee, one of the oldest civic groups in the country, this figure was flattered: two hundred thousand would be closer to the truth. Regardless, there was potential for a vibrant civil society. According to the Civil Society Chamber, about 10 percent of the citizens was active in non-commercial club life. The Academy of Science, after sociological research, came up with just over 5 percent.⁹

Even more important was the decision of short-lived President Medvedev to loosen the reins legally as well. In 2009, more than a year after taking office, he broadened the law on associations somewhat. The registration of NGOs was simplified again. And the easily abused concepts of ‘threat to national unity or identity’ and ‘threat to cultural heritage’ were removed from the law. However, the restrictive references to ‘national security’ and ‘territorial integrity and sovereignty’ remained in place.

The Friedrich Ebert Stiftung expressed optimism. ‘The last decade has seen a growing understanding that a strategy of critical cooperation with state power may lead to more than a radical opposition strategy.’¹⁰

In 2010, there was reason for this optimism. The route Medvedev had chosen seemed to be consolidating internationally as well. In 2011, for example, the *EU-Russia Civil Society Forum*, a network of NGOs from the European Union and Russia, was established.

In a report for the *International NGO Training and Research Center*, two researchers predicted not much later, following the Kremlin’s promise ‘to prioritize social issues:’

8 Lang, et al (2010)

9 Lang, et al (2010)

10Lang, et al (2010)

‘Civil society organizations are well positioned to achieve positive results. This is a kind of “crossroads” for Russian civil society. Will activists and organizations cooperate with the government or will they seek conflict? It is likely that they will choose the first strategy. They then face the challenge of how to resist incorporation and to maintain their own agenda.’¹¹

3.2 Return of Vladimir Putin

That choice did not materialize. Medvedev’s departure and Putin’s re-election in 2012 put an end to the thaw. After the fraudulent parliamentary elections of 2011, Moscow and some other major cities had been the scene of demonstrations for fair elections. That protest movement also targeted Putin’s return and lasted until after his inauguration in May 2012. When calm returned that summer, the Kremlin did not accommodate the citizens’ movement. On the contrary, government and parliament decided on a cascade of repressive legislation. The main restrictions which civil society had to face, were the laws on the registration of ‘foreign agents’ (2012) and against ‘undesirable organizations’ (2015). Both laws were tightened over the years. For example, the law on ‘foreign agents’ was extended towards academic institutions and the mass media, and in 2019 it was established that not only organizations, but also individual citizens could be classified as ‘foreign agents.’

Almost immediately, these laws were deployed. First up was the independent election observer organization Golos (Voice). These laws soon proved to have more than purely administrative significance. They could be and were in fact used to punish NGOs financially and eventually dissolve them. A climax in this escalation was reached in late 2021 when the courts ruled that the historical society Memorial and its human rights arm, both ‘foreign agents,’ should be liquidated.

3.3 Gongs contra NGOs

This legislation did not eliminate civil society from the scene. But the balance between various Civil Society Organizations, as the broad civil society is conveniently called, did shift. The authentically independent non-governmental organizations (NGOs) more and more became objects of repression. The so-called Government Operated Non-Governmental Organizations (GONGOs), which the government ‘marketed’ to engage citizens in social volunteering, became increasingly important. That process gained momentum after Putin’s re-election in 2018, when he began his fourth and technically last term in office in the Kremlin.

Political scientist and Kremlinologist Tatyana Stanovaya summed it up this way: ‘At the heart of Putin’s fourth presidential term is this new motto: “We owe you nothing.”’¹² At first, NGOs still asserted themselves formidably. Civic initiatives around local issues

11 Buxton, C., & Konovalova, E. (2012). Russian civil society: History, today, and future prospects. Briefing Paper, 37. International NGO Training and Research Center.

12 Robert E. Berls Jr. Civil Society in Russia: Its Role under an Authoritarian Regime, Part I: The Nature of Russian Civil Society. Nuclear Threat Initiative (NTI), July 2021.

continued to emerge. Urban planning, which came at the expense of green spaces, and environmental issues, such as waste disposal near residential areas, were crystallizing points for a new kind of civil society. ‘A new kind of Russian civil society is growing on dirt,’ said analyst Andrei Kolesnikov of the think tank Carnegie Moscow. According to Kolesnikov, actions against garbage dumps in neighbourhoods were a form of ‘backyard sovereignty.’ Some activists ‘politicized’ in this process and joined the opposition, according to Kolesnikov.¹³ The American Institute of Modern Russia also took this line. ‘Mass protests may remain an important aspect of Russian politics.’ However, their impact should not be overestimated. ‘Without fault lines within the political elite, street protests are unlikely to lead to radical political change,’ the institute cautiously concluded in 2020.¹⁴

The flip side was that non-political civil society gradually lost autonomy. Repressive legislation and measures against ‘foreign agents,’ for example, further split civil society. ‘This polarization had an impact on both working conditions and opportunities to work together. There was a growing gap between “loyal” and “safe” NGOs, engaged in social work and charitable activities, and the ‘dangerous’ human rights organizations, according to Vyacheslav Bachmin of the Helsinki Committee Moscow.¹⁵ Russia was no exception. Civil society was also bearing the brunt of political polarization elsewhere in the former Soviet bloc, the *EU-Russia Civil Society Forum* noted. ‘The space for civil society organizations in Central and Eastern Europe has shrunk since 2013, when the political climate became more antagonistic,’ said researchers from this multilateral network.¹⁶

3.4. New Constitution

Carnegie analyst Kolesnikov described the new perspective in the tipping year of 2020. After a plebiscite, organized between corona lockdowns, Russia received a new, even more centralist, constitution in the summer of that year, that offered the prospect of a long-term presidency for Putin. The constitutional limitation of the number of reigns (no more than two in a row) was lifted for the incumbent president. His previous four terms in office from 2000 to 2008 and from 2012 to deo volente 2024 had been ‘cancelled’ by the State Duma. The formal consequence of that decision was that any (re)election of Putin in 2024 would count as his first term, and he could then formally stay on until 2036.

This constitutional and political turning point occurred in the shadow of the pandemic. That health crisis revealed similar reactions in society as in, for example, the Netherlands. After a phase of mutual solidarity among citizens and a flourishing voluntary sector, impatience about the ongoing measures also grew in Russia.

‘The crisis has revealed the weakness of Russian non-profit organizations. A lack of materials, and a lack of skills and experience to use new technologies, meant that CSOs

13 Andrei Kolesnikov. Protests in Russia: Between Civil Society and Political Opposition. Carnegie Center Moscow. November 2020.

14 Institute of Modern Russia. Russia under Putin: 20 years of protests. New York, 2020.

15 Viacheslav Bakhmin. EU-Russia Civil Society Forum. 2020 Report on the state of civil society in the EU and Russia. Berlin, 2021.

16 Ulla Pape and Filip Pazderski. Navigating through Uncertain Times: Civil Society in Central and Eastern Europe. June 2021.

could not fully transition to remote working. Many organizations had no strategy, no alternative funds and no buffers,' Bachmin of the Helsinki Committee wrote in his annual report for the *EU-Russia Civil Society Forum*. Yet he was not purely pessimistic. 'Many Russian CSOs are used to working under uncertain or even precarious conditions. Through flexibility, adaptability, responsiveness and willingness to cooperate, the sector was able to overcome the most acute phase of the crisis. Moreover, new coalitions and partnerships were realized.'¹⁷

3.5 Distrust

In this climate, distrust of the government quickly reared its head again during the health crisis. The Russian government's vaccination campaign turned out to be a failure. Russia was the first country with its own vaccine (Sputnik), but after a year only 43 percent of the population had been fully vaccinated, according to the WHO.¹⁸

The concept of distrust is a recurring word in the history of civil society. The economist Igor Joergens once defined Russian society with an apt witticism: 'Russia is a society of individuals.'

The consequences of this gap between the power of the central state and the individualism of the bourgeoisie once again proved insurmountable. The sociologist Grigori Joeden, one of the supporting forces behind the Free Historical Society, which from 2014 onwards pleaded (unsuccessfully) for a less dogmatic educational canon, put it this way. Because of the atomization of Russian society, there is little solidarity. 'With this is connected a distrust of any collective self-organization. This is also reinforced by state propaganda,' Joeden told the Heinrich Böll Stiftung, the research institute of Bündnis 90/Die Grünen in Germany.¹⁹

Sociological research by the Levada Center confirmed this analysis by Joeden. From the end of 2020 to the beginning of 2021, Russia was quite unexpectedly gripped by street protests. The demonstrations focused sometimes on the Kremlin-enforced resignation of a regional governor in Khabarovsk, other times on the arrest and conviction of anti-corruption activist Aleksei Navalny. But public opinion quickly turned against this activist civil society. In the fall of 2020, 47 percent was still sympathetic to the demonstrations in Khabarovsk, compared to 16 percent with a negative attitude. However, in January 2021, only 22 percent expressed approval of the demonstrations against Navalny's arrest and 39 percent showed disapproval.²⁰

In a survey after the parliamentary elections of September 2021, this apathy appeared to have consolidated. Even if they had voted – either out of a sense of duty or coerced by their employer – it turned out that citizens had no illusions. 'Everything has been decided in

17 Viacheslav Bakhmin. *EU-Russia Civil Society Forum. 2020 Report on the state of civil society in the EU and Russia*. Berlin, 2021.

18 <https://covid19.who.int/region/euro/country/ru>

19 Grigori Joeden. *Die Leute in Russland wollen selbst Entscheidungen treffen*. Interview with the Heinrich Böll Stiftung. February 2020.

20 <https://www.levada.ru/2021/02/10/yanvarskie-protesty/>

advance anyway’ and ‘it doesn’t matter, the authorities will do what they deem necessary anyway,’ was what Levada Center director Denis Volkov heard over and over again.²¹ In the words of economist Vladislav Inozemtsev, who fled from Russia: ‘The problem is the lack of recognition that it is the population that empowers its leaders, and therefore not that it is the rulers who determine the degree of freedom of the population. The problem is the lack of recognition that a state must be built from the bottom up, through democratic elections.’²²

3.6 How inevitable will Soviet man remain?

What are the sometimes visible, sometimes invisible distrust of the government and apathy based on? A critique of liberal complaints about electoral fraud that Levada leader Lev Goedkov gave is instructive in answering this question.²³ Fair elections would not necessarily produce a different outcome, Goedkov argues. It is too easy to blame propaganda, fraud and intimidation of alternative candidates. The causes go much deeper. Goedkov accuses liberal politicians, like those in power, of having a rather nihilistic, flat view of man. Levada shows time and again that many people (or sometimes even the majority) vote for the regime because it is the way it should be, out of ‘administrative obedience.’ Or because the act contributes to a sense of community, which is virtually absent at other points in society. At least voting means something then. And people who are critical of the regime don’t participate in the elections, because they don’t see much point in it and somehow suspect the supposedly critical leaders of collaboration.

Goedkov says that the Russian collective consciousness is still strongly marked by totalitarianism. The population is used to permanently adapting to the demands of the state, and this makes democratic elections complicated in advance, if not doomed to fail. Russians are well aware that fraud and crime are widespread. But they also love their state because at least it sometimes takes care of them. They are also unsure where possible alternative administrators should come from and they reason that it is better to do business with the devil you know. It is from these kinds of considerations that their voting behaviour or their refusal to vote stems, not from a pronounced desire for change, let alone for democracy.

The self-appointed spokespersons on behalf of the people (the ‘intelligentsia’), according to Goedkov, do not always have an interest in dwelling on this at length, because it undermines their position. But they did not see the invasion of Crimea or the war with Ukraine coming, nor the patriotic euphoria among the population and the anti-Western sentiment afterwards, because they assume as perfectly natural that Russians would like to become normal (‘Western’). They are unwilling or unable to recognize the average Russian

21 <https://www.levada.ru/2021/11/18/demobilizatsiya-i-polyarizatsiya-parlamentskie-vybory-v-zerkale-oprosov-obshhestvennogo-mneniya/>

22 Robert E. Berls Jr. *Civil Society in Russia: Its Role under an Authoritarian Regime, Part I: The Nature of Russian Civil Society*. Nuclear Threat Initiative (NTI), July 2021.

23 Goedkov, L. (2020). A Crisis of Understanding ‘Reality’. *Russian Social Science Review*, 61(1-2), 69-105.

citizen, an inhabitant of a Soviet flat who is used to shortage, theft and betrayal. This Soviet man lives without functional or institutional connections with others, to experience diversity or trust, and he can only think about society in meaningless, 'historical' categories, such as 'the people' or 'thousand-year-old Russia.'

It is not an optimistic view of society that emerges from Goedkov's approach. A stable middle class or a group with a strong, proud self-identification on which to pin hope for modernization does not reveal itself.

4. Current state of affairs

In the past decades the Levada Center regularly gauged society to translate the mood among the citizens about civil society into figures. A recurring question that should give an indication of the potential of civil society is: ‘To what extent do you have influence on what happens in your flat/neighbourhood/city/country?’ The September 2020 survey²⁴ revealed that Russians feel they have barely (26%) to no (55%) influence on the state. They also have no (28%) or hardly any (37%) influence on events in their city or neighbourhood, respectively. When it comes to apartment buildings, in which most Russians have a home, the mood is slightly more positive: 15% thinks they have no influence at all and 34% no significant influence, while 49% believes they have some or even serious influence on developments in their building.

Those figures look negative. But the trend over the years gave a slightly more dynamic picture. Over a period of five to fifteen years, the confidence of citizens that they had some control over their living environment had increased slightly, the Levada Center observed at the end of 2020. Some figures illustrate this development. In 2006, only 10% of citizens thought they had a real or greater grip on their own residential block. By 2020, that self-confidence appeared to have grown to 21%. The number of Russians who felt they had some influence in their neighbourhood or city had grown from 8% to 22% in those fourteen years.²⁵

The competing VTsIOM, the sociological research institute founded during perestroika, but which Levada et al. had turned their backs on in the early 21st century because it was taking a less independent course, detected similar developments. VTsIOM defines civil society much more narrowly than the Levada Center. Charities and volunteering, such as donating blood, are already forms of ‘civic activism,’ according to this agency. The pandemic has given civil society an enormous boost, according to VTsIOM. The researchers derive this conclusion from the success of the organization *We Together*, which organized neighbourly help and other kinds of volunteering during the corona crisis. At its peak, *We Together* included 188,000 volunteers and 9,000 organizations. The club raised 1.8 billion rubles (20 million euros) in donations.

‘Does that mean there can be a mature civil society tomorrow?’, sociologist Yekaterina Kurbangaleyeva, also a member of the Civil Society Chamber, wondered in early 2021 in VTsIOM’s quarterly journal. No, ‘not yet, the road is still long,’ was her reply.²⁶

24 <https://www.levada.ru/2020/10/13/chuvstvo-otvetstvennosti/>

25 <https://www.levada.ru/2020/10/13/chuvstvo-otvetstvennosti/>

26 ВЦИОМ. Соци диггер. Гражданский активизм. Март, 2021.

5. Three ways of speaking about civil society

While we were doing our research in 2020/2021, Russian society was badly affected by the corona pandemic. In 2022, the war against Ukraine was added to this. The war is not incorporated into the data below, but the corona crisis is.

The Levada Center research institute tracked developments through surveys and focus groups across the country, from Vladivostok to St. Petersburg, from Novosibirsk to Moscow, Kazan and Rostov. This was done in two phases. In the first phase, the mood of the population was surveyed during the first corona wave in the spring of 2020. In the second phase, citizens were surveyed in discussion groups about the state of society before and after the parliamentary elections in September 2021.

We cannot conclude on the basis of the results of this qualitative research that there is a civil society in Russia that meets the strict criteria of the sociological definition – that there must be formal or informal associations in society that live by their own terms. This is in line with the previous part of this report. But it is still important to note that for some stakeholders the existence of a civil society is indisputably established and that they also act on the basis of this idea.

If we step back a bit, we can distinguish three relevant ways of speaking about Russian civil society. They are the result of answers to questions about motives for moving or not moving, about assessments of elections or of actions such as in Khabarovsk. There are no people who state this literally, but there are identifiable groups in whom you are likely to encounter this reasoning.

The first form puts some expectations on civil society but not on the people expressing the view. This is the most prominent form.

The state is there to protect us. Civil society is something for others, for difficult people who don't know how to keep their mouth shut, or for people with a sense of responsibility, who help out where the government fails.

Civil society exists primarily to supplement what the government cannot do.

Age, profession and city don't matter that much to those who express this view.

Levada Center polls show that about a quarter of the adult Russian population has an affinity for this kind of volunteerism, that is, a willingness to do something, despite societal indifference. This behaviour of citizens does not need to take on institutionalized forms. There are individual forms of helping those in need that are beginning to become institutionalized. There are also people who have made help a part of their lives, but do not formalize that activity in any way, and base it only on personal agreements.

This thinking is expressed in statements such as that 'a volunteer is a kind of example to others of how a citizen should behave,' or that volunteering 'gives young people a chance to connect with others,' or that it 'gives older people a chance to stay in touch with society.' What motivates people to engage in civic participation and in particular to volunteer is a more controversial issue. There are religious issues at stake, especially for active volunteers. Reticence and caution are also expressed, as well as certain self-evidence that the state will eventually take the reins anyway, and that this may actually be as it should

be. When it comes to state protection, think not only of the West as an enemy but also of fellow Russians, who by no means always trust each other.

In fact, the issue of the independence of volunteer organizations from the state is a hot topic. The state imposes conditions on many non-commercial organizations which use volunteers, that make their activities very difficult or impossible. Most of them have frameworks and rules imposed on them. Also among the volunteers these rules led to discussions about the relationship with the state, to tensions and sometimes to irritations. Somewhat more skeptical people – primarily urban rather than rural, and primarily elderly rather than young – articulated a variant of this typically Russian view.

The state is an evil that cannot be eradicated, and about which you should have few illusions. Social commitment may stem from honest motives, but it is not very useful. Power is at such a distance that protests are never heard. The whole idea of a civil society does not fit Russian society very well.

Again, such a view of the world does not need to stop someone from demonstrating or handing out soup in the neighbouring apartment. But the basic intuition is that the reach of any social effort is limited, and that there is not a whole lot of point in trying to change that yourself.

Finally, in addition to the examples of volunteers, who see themselves as assistants to the state structures, as people who do useful things together with them, and as those who help the state structures to work more efficiently or complement them, there are also other volunteers. Indeed, some civil society activities (in the broadest sense of the word) by definition clash with the state.

Among younger professionals, but also among activists with a track record, a third way of reasoning can be noted, which is not overflowing with hope but which does show some belief in democratization.

We must persevere against the times to make society better, even if the signs are rarely favourable. Maybe we should call it civil society, maybe something else. But protests against this state are necessary, if it is not safe today then again tomorrow.

Appeals to human rights or universal values are invariably made cautiously, because after all no one wants to come across as naïve.

The clue is that for those who think about civil society in Russia, the state is usually the reference point – and not, as in the Netherlands or in Western Europe in general, non-governmental civil society, be it the church, the sports club or a political party.

That relationship between state and citizen can be understood in two ways. More or less positive, in the sense that the government is accepted with a heavy heart as a somewhat heavy-handed father. Or predominantly negative, in the sense that the government is seen as the weather, as something inevitable to which it is better to resign yourself.

But in both cases the relationship is vertical and without the intervention of intermediaries. And if the state is not the reference point, then the motivation among people is strong but expectations are low.

What do people say about civil society?

‘Civil society is based on the principles of democracy and on a sufficiently high level of education of its members. A true civil society is a society of educated people.’

(Saint Petersburg, participant in a protest).

‘There certainly is a civil society. Maybe not to the extent that we would like it to be, but it exists as a kind of incubators, and every year their number increase.’ *(Expert).*

‘If I understand the term correctly, civil society is formed by the people who run the country. So not by the people who hold picket demonstrations against the authorities. A normal civil society assumes functions of the (state) power, but does not transfer them to the power. Direct democracy in ancient Athens, that was civil society.’

‘Without the risk of detention, nothing will work.’

‘Civil society in St. Petersburg is not a whole, it is segmented into three parts. First, politics, second, charities, and third, human rights organizations.’

What do people say about volunteering?

‘I would say that this is selfless help to the world, to anyone, not only to yourself but also to the outside world. But all in all I think it is a healthy form of selfishness.

Because (by volunteering – ed.) you stroke your own ego anyway.’

(Saint Petersburg, volunteers).

‘It’s also a way to meet people. Some of the people are like that. It’s mostly young people, and it’s not so much about the desire to help as it is to hang out. “My friends, it’s a certain environment, a certain company.” By the way, I don’t see anything bad in this, I’ll say that right away. The important thing is the result, the motive doesn’t matter.’

(Saint Petersburg, volunteers).

‘These are people who don’t set themselves up as political activists ... and they can have the most diverse political views, really all kinds. But at the same time they are engaged ... in an enterprising way they realize certain projects that create something and gradually change the environment, that create a certain air and atmosphere in society, that then as a result of a cumulative effect creates the call for political change anyway. To be able to create this air, it is not necessary to be a political activist yourself.’

(Expert).

But not all think this way

‘The end never justifies the means. If someone who is sinful starts volunteering, so that he can receive forgiveness and grace, he is only doing that because there is something in return. A volunteer, a true volunteer, however, always does everything selflessly.’

(Moscow, volunteers).

What do people say about the government?

‘Well, if our government fulfilled all its obligations, there would be far fewer volunteers.’

(Moscow, volunteers).

‘Sometimes it seems to be necessary to protect citizens against the state.’

‘Well, I think that unfortunately in some cases the public administration, the government agencies and the state do not always work well. And then we need volunteers to represent the interests of the residents against the government.’

(Moscow, volunteers).

‘I just see that the bosses are not smarter, but much dumber than me.’

‘They don’t give a damn in Moscow about what is happening in the Urals.’

‘Russian society is low in political literacy. The establishment shows that it is nervous ...’

‘In Chamovniki [a district in the capital, along the Moscow River, between the Kremlin and the Olympic Stadium – mh/hs] a small project was once planned. The opinion of the citizens was polled. Of the respondents, 93 percent were against and 7 percent for the project. The poll’s organizers wrote at the time, ‘we recommend not taking this opinion into account.’

6. Casuistry: Hope dies sooner than hoped for

Three case studies tell a little more about what to make of these three interpretations: the corona outbreak, the protests in the capitals, and the protest in Khabarovsk.

6.1 The corona crisis

By way of large-scale opinion polls, the Levada Center asked Russians twice in 2020 what they thought about the willingness to help each other in emergency situations. The first time was in March 2020, when Russian society was just getting ready for the corona epidemic (half the population at the time still thought there would be no epidemic). The second time was in August 2020, when the whole country had already experienced what the epidemic meant and how we appear to behave in such circumstances.

The poll conducted on the eve of the virus outbreak showed that the option ‘everyone will help everyone’ was chosen mainly by people born and raised in the Soviet era, and also by those who respect the authorities or have at least some power themselves. The majority of respondents believed that ‘people would care more about themselves and “their neighbours”.’

Those who expected that people in the countryside would feel greater solidarity toward each other were disappointed. In rural Russia, the number of people who expected people to support each other more in times of need was the smallest: 15% compared to 20% in Moscow. More than half (53%) of rural people believed that people would only help themselves and their ‘neighbours,’ compared to 47% in the capital. Similar disappointment was in stall for those who hoped that the youth would come to the aid of people in need first. Instead, the poll showed that young people ignored mutual aid (which only 11% would chose to be engaged in) as much as possible. More often than older people, they expected Russians to take care of themselves and their ‘neighbours’ exclusively. Two-thirds of the student youth thought so.

After the first corona wave, opinions changed slightly, but not significantly. Those who attributed altruistic behaviour to Russians remained in the minority, although their number grew slightly, from 17% to 23%. Nevertheless, the selfish attitude was more than one and a half times more common in society than the altruistic one. In terms of the concept of solidarity, therefore, we must conclude that Russia is not so much a civil society as a society that stands up for ‘our neighbours.’

‘Well, I think we’re going to see more restrictions, I think there’s going to be tougher domestic politics. They’re going to put more restrictions on us in everything, in freedom of movement, of thought and action.’

‘I think Covid-19 has opened some people’s eyes. People have started to see, as it were, how the state really relates to them. Even people who were not interested in politics at all began to take an interest in it.’

(Moscow, participants protest).

6.2 Street protest: no pars pro toto

The research was also conducted among people who participated in various forms of public protest in Moscow and St. Petersburg. Street protest has been important in Russia in recent years, due to the lack of institutionalized channels through which different groups of society can influence the government and its policies.

The existing institutions, represented in parties, in elections and in elected authorities and the mass media, do not fulfill this role. The majority of the population accepts this state of affairs as a natural fact. However, there are social groups in Russian society that are dissatisfied with this. They try to express their discontent through protests, most of which take place in major cities such as Moscow and St. Petersburg.

There are several reasons for this. Firstly, it is precisely in the main cities that there are social niches (educational institutions, places of work, cultural meeting places) for those Russian citizens who are chronically dissatisfied with the behaviour of the authorities. The infrastructure of other cities is worse in this respect and therefore this group is much smaller there. Secondly, the presence of social control mechanisms, particularly police powers to detect and prosecute 'deviant behavior,' is lower the larger a city is. This was at least the case before the introduction of modern means of video recording and facial recognition in crowds. Before then, in large cities, participation in protests could remain largely anonymous.

There is no single answer to the question of the causes of the protests. We suspect that an important breeding ground is the absence of other legitimate channels through which society can influence the authorities.

But all too likely this can also be explained in other ways. It is instructive to look at the answers of the respondents. Focus group participants emphasized that solidarity becomes a problem because of the disciplinary policies of the authorities during the first corona wave. Several citizens saw an increase in repressive potential on the one hand and a decrease in protest potential on the other. According to them, an atmosphere of anxious expectations was created.

‘Why do they take to the streets? Surely it is known that everything is paid for.’

‘Paid for by whom?’

‘It is known by whom.’

‘But still, by whom?’

‘By whom, by whom? By America and the West.’

‘And how do they pay them?’

‘That is not known.’

[...]

‘Well, that’s the way these people are, they can’t sit still. They want to participate in everything.’

‘But they risk being clubbed or arrested.’

‘That’s what they want, they want to experience it.’

‘I don’t understand, do you respect these people or not?’

‘Both.’

[...]

There is also unconditional understanding.

‘Who’s going to take to the streets? The best of us take to the streets. The most honest, the bravest. What shall I say, those who always die first.’

(Moscow, a group of people who never demonstrate)

6.3 The protests in Khabarovsk: no pars pro toto either

The protests in Khabarovsk were a typical example of hope. In the second half of 2020 there were regular demonstrations in the city of Khabarovsk. From July 11 to December 2020, weekly actions took place in support of the arrested and fired governor Sergey Foergal. In protest against the fate of the governor, who was a member of the Kremlin-affiliated party of hypernationalist thugs, headed by parliamentarian Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, the city’s residents for a long time tenaciously took to the streets. In terms of duration and persistence, the actions in Khabarovsk in 2020 were the most notable in Russia. They seemed to set the tone for much of the social activity in Russia.

We figured out how people in the big cities viewed these events and what impact they had on what is happening in Russia.

The activists were hopeful. ‘What is happening in Khabarovsk is strategically correct. It is the awakening of a social consciousness, of the self-reflection of a nation which is very much lacking in us,’ chronicled one Moscow participant in the protests. Residents of St. Petersburg pointed out that the protest in their city differs from that in other Russian cities. ‘St. Petersburg differs from many regions in that there is a small but constantly active group of activists here. This is basically a small proportion of passionate people, but they are constantly active. And other regions don’t have activists who are constantly active. But at the same time, if things explode there, they explode completely. That is, ordinary people

who are not activists take to the streets.’

In Russian society as a whole, however, support for the protests in Khabarovsk was moderate, the results of a nationwide survey by the Levada Center showed.

‘I think obtaining freedom is the goal.’

‘Well ... that’s all over the world, and with us people are mostly fighting for justice. “Freedom, freedom,” you can argue about that, someone can say, “we have freedom, freedom in abundance.” It seems to me that our national motive is always justice.’

(Saint Petersburg, participant protest).

‘The discussion of freedom and justice began in Russian society in the 19th century. The intelligentsia understood ‘freedom’ as the destruction of an oppressive order and ‘justice’ as the establishment of an order that was equally beneficial to all. But in today’s circumstances, you can interpret these concepts quite contradictorily.’

‘Why are they taking to the streets? I think for justice ... Activists are people who want to change something, they believe in themselves, they believe that they can do this, if they are going to protest, collect votes, and pull other people along to change the situation in the country.’

‘Their main motive is that they want to become participants, active participants in the society of the state they live in.’

(Saint Petersburg, a group of participants in protests)

6.4 Conclusion

During the covid crisis two parallel trends manifested themselves in Russia. On the one hand, individual volunteering flourished within the framework of government policy, especially during the first waves of contamination. On the other hand, government repression of unauthorized civic initiatives actually increased.

How these separate trends will continue to develop after the start of Russia’s war against Ukraine is uncertain. But it is plausible that the first form of (subservient) volunteering will come under more pressure. And it is also likely that critical citizens will at the same time once again start a search for informal and underground help circuits, not so much to contribute to a renewed democratization of society, but rather to escape the increasingly dictatorial state.

The difficult relationship to civil society (or to parliamentary democracy) described above is not unique to Russia. It is beyond the scope of this report to go into it in depth, but the aversion to pluralism can also be observed in the Netherlands and elsewhere in Western Europe or North America.

What is unique to Russia, however, is that it is the only European country where hopeful developments in civil society leave so few traces time and again, and where the building of a civil society therefore has to be started anew over and over again. The desire for security and stability in Russia is (understandably) bigger than the desire for participation and criticism. Although the welfare state exists only in a modest form – and is, moreover,

a legacy of three-quarters of a century of communism – the Russian welfare state nevertheless exerts an attraction, not only because it provides pensions, social schemes and hospitals, but also because the government can be called to account for it. To the extent that there is citizenship in Russia, social citizenship is much stronger than political citizenship.

This dichotomy is only likely to become more acute with the war on Ukraine. As social repression increases – Russia has tended more and more toward martial law autarchy since the beginning of the invasion – the space for civic initiatives becomes smaller and the need for the government to maintain the social contract of the welfare state actually increases. The likelihood that any social capital can be invested, already not great in Russia, will be further reduced. As a result, public life in Russia will die down. At the same time, the price that society must pay for the continuation of the social contract will become higher and higher due to increasing inflation and decreasing employment. But because Russia has historically and geographically wider margins than, say, the Netherlands, the consequences are likely to be able to be contained for longer than western sanctions planners would like. Growing socio-cultural apathy, sometimes culminating in social cynicism, will make it more difficult to sustain the last vestiges of an already rudimentary civil society.

‘There are two camps [among the activists – mh/hs]. For some, the demonstrations were a party, an opportunity to go out. Sorry for the expression, but that’s voting cattle. Others participated to express their civic position: “I have the right to vote, I can change my country, which I love and live in. What is happening in this country is not right. That is why we are here. We are not alone, we are a whole bunch”.’

‘The last drop for me was the decision to cancel the constitutional tenure’ [of President Putin – mh/hs].

‘There is a wonderful Russian saying: “a cat has nothing to do but to look out of the window.” That applies to people, too.’

‘Russians are in such awe of authority that revolutions and coups only happen in Moscow or St. Petersburg.’

‘It used to be difficult to organize something in remote locations. Thanks to the Internet, this has become very easy, but mainly for young people, students and others who work and are on the Internet from morning to night. As it is said, “in the dream of reason a monstrosity is born”.’

‘I think the presidential elections in 2024 will happen in the same way as the parliamentary elections in 2021. The protests have been crushed. There is no great potential left. In 1990-1991 [the transition from Soviet Union to Russia – mh/hs] the elite was the center of crystallization. That’s why a change of power towards Yeltsin could take place. Now there are no crystallization points anymore and the transition to another situation is impossible.’

‘Frankly, I am afraid to look five years ahead. I don’t see any general changes.’

‘In five years, life will only get tougher. Our geopolitics and foreign policy are unjustified. I feel that our country will end up behind an “iron curtain” once more, and we won’t be able to leave. In ten years we will formally elect a king and restore the monarchy. And then everything will be finished.’

‘Vladimir Vladimirovich goes and then there will be another Vladimir Vladimirovich.’

‘With us an attempted coup is punishable, but a coup is not.’

‘A successor is needed. But the KGB will not relinquish power.’

7. Recommendations

The war against Ukraine has had incalculable and above all negative effects on civil society in Russia itself. Even after a possible ceasefire and even after a possible change of power in the Kremlin, there is little chance that a civil society that may bear that name will recover. This raises the question of whether and how the Dutch government should shape its old policy of supporting independent civil initiatives. It is not up to us to answer this question. However, we would like to make several suggestions and recommendations for the near future.

- The vast majority of the Russian population supports the war against Ukraine. Only one seventh did not want to support it in the first weeks of the invasion, according to Levada research. This minuscule section of society will not be decisive for Russia's course, but it deserves compassion and support because it is indispensable for the germination of movements that continue to strive, against the current, for a more democratic social order.
- The Dutch government should systematically map out (political) civil initiatives inside and outside Russia and support them where possible, openly and/or covertly. In doing so, it could take advice from exiles who can stand the test of democratic criticism.
- The same applies to action groups and individuals who devote themselves to the protection of persecuted fellow citizens. Non-political citizens' initiatives, for example in the domain of environmental management and urban planning, have become increasingly irrelevant. Nevertheless, it is worthwhile to monitor and take stock of developments in these sectors from the Netherlands.
- Journalism is and will remain important to the Russian citizenry. Independent and traditional journalists therefore deserve special support from the Netherlands. In line with this, Internet facilities may also be provided. The fact that Amsterdam is home to one of the largest hubs also makes this support easily achievable.
- Sociological research on the ground remains a useful quantitative supplement to classical (diplomatic/journalistic) methods. Even in the current war conditions, it is worthwhile to explore and use the margins and opportunities for research by Levada, for example.
- If bilateral relations with Russia are on the wane, it is of great importance that developments in the moribund civil society are systematically mapped out from the Netherlands by NGOs here. The national government could make facilities and resources available for this purpose.
- For democratic citizens in Russia, it is of vital importance that the human dialogue with kindred spirits in the Netherlands is not cut off, because the European sanctions are too coarse-grained and too bureaucratic for customization. The national government must look for ways to make mutual contacts possible. A specific visa policy, both in terms of policy principles and concrete implementation, is required in this regard.
- To give substance to the above recommendations, continued research into the last anchor points for civil society in Russia is needed.

Accountability

The research with the focus groups and the interviews with experts took place in three phases: in the summer, autumn and winter of 2020. Due to the corona measures in place in Russia, all interviews were conducted online, under the auspices of Alexey Levinson and Svetlana Korolanka from research firm Levada. Questionnaires and interview guides were created in consultation with the authors of this report. Guiding the conversations was the question of whether and to what extent participants discern social activity that could be defined as civil society; whether or not they participate in it, and the reason for it; how much hope they place in this kind of citizenship.

A total of twelve focus group meetings was held in six cities (Moscow, St. Petersburg, Kazan, Rostov na Don, Novosibirsk and Vladivostok). In addition, six interviews were held in St. Petersburg and Moscow with key figures in Russian civil society, people who have been participating in a responsible position as activists or organizers for a long time. Levada made transcripts of all meetings and interviews in Russian. The translation and editing of the interview reports was done by Wabke Waaier and Hubert Smeets respectively. The coordination of the project was in the hands of Menno Hurenkamp.

The authors of this report have only used the material provided to produce a clear narrative for Dutch use. This means that while we list all the arguments that were made during the meetings, we do not venture to say which way of reasoning is the most credible, which deserves the most support or what the explanation is for how that argumentation came about. We do not know much more about the backgrounds of the participants than gender, age, whether they are socially active or not, and their place of residence. If you talk to any Russian about this subject, you will most likely hear one of the lines of argumentation in this report, but no further conclusions may be drawn from it.

Menno Hurenkamp & Hubert Smeets.