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Russia's "uncivil society": The threat, sources, and policy recommendations

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The concept of "civil society" is long now well-established in basic social and political thought. Standard definitions hold that civil society structures exist between the individual and the state, taking the form of associations, community groups and other organizations that serve to empower the individual and promote democratic values. Recently, however, both political scientists and Russian studies specialists have recognized that the fall of the Soviet Union has led to the emergence of organizations that are radically different from the Western model of civil society. These "uncivil society" structures still bring together people based on some common interests or goals, but these goals are frequently not empowerment and the spread of democracy, but rather, the promotion of violent xenophobia, radical nationalism, and neo-fascism. The continuing activity of groups of this kind in Russia, and especially, their relationship to both the Russian government and to the Russian population at large presents a particular strategic problem for any Western companies currently looking to do business in Russia, especially on the retail level.

To understand how groups of this type can emerge, how the standard writing on civil society fails to explain them, and to develop a global context for the phenomenon, two excellent resources are:

Chambers, S., & Kopstein, J., (2001). *Bad civil society*. *Political Theory, 29*(6)*,* 837-865

The authors introduce the distinction between social groups that merely reinforce existing divides, and those that transcend them. They further demonstrate how some groups that do not explicitly engage in "negative" (particularly, violent) behavior nonetheless enable or influence specific individuals to do so.

Pedahzur A., & Weinberg, L., (2001). Modern European democracy and its enemies: The threat of the Extreme Right. *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions, 2*(1), 52–72.

Looking closely at the European experience, Pedahzur and Weinberg present the economic and social conditions for the emergence of the extreme right-wing form of uncivil society, both in Western Europe, and in the former Eastern Bloc. They explore the concept further by identifying specific types of uncivil society structures, including formal organizations, social movements, and grassroots actions.

The following papers draw on these theories to narrow the focus to Russia specifically.

Umland, A., (2002). Toward an uncivil society? Contextualizing the decline of the post-Soviet Russian parties of the extreme right wing. *Demokratizatsiya: The Journal of Post-Soviet Democratization, 10*(3). 362-391.

Throughout the 1990's, much of the discussion of uncivil society in Russia dealt with its formal component of established political parties, some represented in the parliament. Umland shifts the

emphasis in the direction of "non-party extremism" and highlights a number of specific sectors of Russian society where uncivil groups are present and active.

Griffin, R., (2003). From slime mould to rhizome: An introduction to the groupuscular right. *Patterns of Prejudice, 37*(1), 27-50.

A crucial question for both the political scientists and for those who would be directly affected by the answer is whether any uncivil society has the potential to evolve into a mass movement akin to Nazism. Griffin argues why that need not be the case in general, and shows why that will not be the case in Russia in particular, while not discounting the dangerous potential of the netwar-like "groupuscule."

The next task in this analysis is to examine some specific extremist groups, as an initial step to evaluating the kinds of threats they can present.

Verkhovsky, A., (2000). Ultra-nationalists in Russia at the onset of Putin's rule. *Nationalities Paper*s, *28*(4), 707-722.

Verkhovsky's article establishes a set of what he calls "trademarks of Russian extremism, and expands on Umland's paper in identifying several groups of concern. His particular strength lies in being able to differentiate the various movements' capability for explicit acts of terrorism, lower-intensity or disorganized violence, and incitement and influence on members and sympathizers.

Kochkin, M., (2002). Who is Mr. Skinhead? *Russia and Eurasia Review*, *1*(7), 1-4.

Looking at one particular such group, Kochkin demonstrates how the resurgent Russian nationalism that is being expressed by the media and the government is being appropriated by the uncivil society. A crucial question he brings up is the level to which the Russian government is either actually complicit in violence against foreigners, or at least willingly turns a blind eye towards such acts.

Mitrokhin, N., (2006). Non-Islamic extremism in today's Russia. *Russia in Global Affairs*, *17*.

The focus of this analysis is on the potential for violent action both by specific extremist groups and by their unaffiliated supporters, for example, football hooligans. Mitrokhin also looks at the activities of the National Bolshevik Party, which, while non-violent, may through its pattern of headline-grabbing "actions," actually present a more immediate threat to a typical Western company that is hosting a press conference, participating in a trade show, or opening a Moscow office.

Shlapentokh, V., (2007). The hatred of others: The Kremlin's powerful but risky weapon. *World Affairs, 169*(3), 134-142.

Shlapentokh's major contribution to this topic is an analysis of the level of public support for expressions of xenophobia and anti-Western beliefs and activities. He specifically examines the

threats Westerners and other foreigners face and finds that as many as 70% of Russians are opposed any foreign ownership of Russian corporations: a number that is absolutely critical to keep in mind for future strategic planning.

To fully understand the dimensions of these groups and their activities, it is best to review a specific recent incident.

Lander, M., & Markoff, J., (2007, May 29). Digital Fears Emerge After Data Siege in Estonia. *The New York Times*.

The exact details of Russia's attack on the Estonian Internet infrastructure will not be known for at least some time. Regardless, this report provides a good position from which to appreciate how Russian uncivil society can reach far outside the country's borders, and how difficult it will be to respond effectively to an action of this type.

Finally, a truly strategic approach to an issue seeks to identify not just its present state, but also potential future developments.

Matthews, O., & Nemtsova, A., (2007, May 28). Young Russia rises: The Kremlin has a new weapon in its war on real or imagined enemies, from opponents at home to foreign revolutionaries. *Newsweek International, 149*(22), 34-37

This recent article forecasts the emergence of a Russian uncivil society organization that is aligned with the implicit goals of the state, receives a modicum of official support, and is explicitly opposed to the interests of the West in general and of the U.S. specifically. In fact, once an organization of that kind has matured, it would be difficult to label it as being outside civil society, rather than simply representative of a different basic concept of what a society's interests are.

Policy recommendations

On a spectrum, the uncivil society situation in Russian can be seen as existing between the situation of the US, where such organizations certainly exist (for example, the Animal Liberation Front or various right-wing militias), but any level of action by them is extraordinary, and the experience of any number of countries that are fighting specific and well-established terrorist groups. Accordingly, any Western company doing business in Russia must be aware that while its interests most likely will not be targeted, there is a potential that they will be.

Policy recommendations for reactions to this fact will have to fall into two categories. Predicting vulnerabilities, not in any tactical sense, but in the sense of determining which actions that a company performs in the course of normal business may incite a response from one of the uncivil society groups discussed, will be one key component of strategic intelligence. The second, equally important, is identifying the particular group or groups that may present a problem – that is, matching threats and vulnerabilities. One interesting fact here is that most, if not all, of these organizations operate quite openly and present both their overarching ideas and

their specific goals in both print and electronic publications. The third component, response to the threat, would presumably involve security and law enforcement expertise. It falls outside the scope of this briefing. Perhaps the one recommendation I would make is to accept that, given the place uncivil society structures currently hold in Russia, relying overly on either the sympathy of Russian society, the protection of Russian law enforcement, or even the cooperation of the Russian government in responding to them may be asking too much.