

Russia's Left Turn

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Ivan I. Kurilla

Volgograd State University

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Former Yukos chairman Mikhail Khodorkovsky's letter warning of the inevitable "left turn" in Russian politics that would follow an emerging left turn in Russian society was one of the topics of discussion during the weeks preceding the ruling on his case by the Russian Court of Appeals in September 2005.

Khodorkovsky's reasoning, which primarily looks like the *mea culpa* of a former beneficiary of unjust privatization and the political program of a future political heavyweight, is certainly worth attention. Alternative explanations for the letter include the influence of a theoretical construction Khodorkovsky found in a journal article, the desperate shortage of new ideas among the anti-Putin opposition, and even the offer of a deal between the oligarchs and Communists. However, certain dimensions of the left turn in Russia's social situation have deep roots and will have longer-lasting consequences.

Historical Roots: Atomized Society?

A widespread error in descriptions of Soviet totalitarian society is the reference to it as atomized. The term implies that there were no structures between the Soviet state and the individual who faced the totality of the state leviathan. The description is simply incorrect. There were, in fact, numerous organizations between the individual and the state in the USSR. The problem was their total dependency on the authorities.

Existence of such dependent organizations may not, at first glance, be so relevant to the construction of civil society. While a Soviet trade union was dependent on the state (and, in fact, was an extension of a state body), it was unable to defend its members from the arbitrariness of the

authorities. Its importance, however, became apparent in a situation of weakened statehood like that which Russia experienced in the 1990s. After the state withdrew its control, the trade union became the basis for the self-organization of employees (or, at least, the model for a radical alternative). Poland's Solidarity may differ from the Russian miners' strikes of the 1990s in important respects, but they both essentially demonstrated the same process of filling the old (Soviet) forms with substance. The same was true for many other organizations created in the USSR. They did not cease to exist; instead, they played a significant role in the shaping of contemporary Russian society.

One of the mistakes made by Western donors was their view of Russian society in the early 1990s as a blank field with no real societal structures. They consequently tried to promote nongovernmental organizations as a form (practically the only form) of societal structuring and failed. Even the use of the term NGO in Russian (with its translated variants NPO and NKO) instead of the old Soviet *obshchestvennye organizatsii* (social organizations) implied a refusal to let Soviet organizations into the brave new world of civil society.

In fact, some elements of Russian society in the 1990s were inherited from earlier periods of history, and past organizations shaped the development of Russian civil society. Among the structures that survived the collapse of the USSR, the most successful were the Komsomol and its affiliated youth organizations, the Communist Party of the Russian Federation (KPRF), and trade unions. Local Communist party organizations, in particular, were active in the development of local communities, while the bulk of innovative research is conducted by universities (as well as by state-owned institutions).

Civil Society as a Project of the Left

The first and most important institute in contemporary Russia that survived the collapse of the old regime was the KPRF. The party consists of a network of local organizations, controls many local governments, and offers a clear career path for Russia's youth. The KPRF is the only truly mass organization in Russia, and it does not quite fit into the current political system of "managed democracy." It also does not look like any other contemporary Russian political party on the right or the left. The ruling United Russia party inherited the *nomenklatura* features of the old Communist Party of the Soviet Union, while the KPRF did not. Set aside the party leadership, members of the State Duma, and Communist governors, and we find a network of groups of active individuals, many of which are neither interested in real politics nor ideology. If we include a variety of affiliated organizations such as women's councils (*zhensovety*), trade unions, and street committees in small cities, we have a picture of the KPRF as a not-strictly-political civil society organization.

Among political parties, the KPRF enjoys the largest network of organizations. The most active youth groups are centered in the National Bolshevik Party (NBP) of Eduard Limonov and the Vanguard of Red Youth (AKM), both leftist organizations. No right-wing party can boast comparable influence, and United Russia enjoys only the artificial mass support of structures organized by the authorities. Truly broad structures that attract mass groups in Russian society almost exclusively exist on the left flank of politics.

Why are the leftists so successful in organizing civil society in Russia?

There are at least three reasons:

- 1) As noted earlier, the largest number of contemporary organizations in Russia were inherited from Soviet times (such as trade unions), and these retain a traditional leftist orientation.
- 2) Leftist values are communitarian ones, and since civil society is also based on communitarian principles (or is evolved from communities that were based on such principles), local activism is almost totally dominated by leftist organizations in today's Russia.
- 3) Leftist parties and movements actively organized and participated in protest movements during the period of reforms in the 1990s and thus built up their networks of organizations. One can say that civil society in the last decade was the real project of the Russian Left. Right-wing politicians, who based their programs on procedural democracy and markets, seemed uninterested in (or unaware of) the need to build support through the development of civil society. They preferred to appeal to the state and state reformers, keeping alive an old saying: "Government is the only European in Russia."

By predicting a left turn in Russia, Khodorkovsky simply noticed this leftist grassroots mobilization. Right-wing politicians and reformers may not be happy about this, but such mobilization effectively represents the appearance of Russian civil society. This civil society is more a conservative institution than a revolutionary one and would probably never agree to shock therapy or radical reform.

Lasting Consequences

Russian civil society arises from Russian society, not from some atomized mass of individuals that never existed. Just as American civil society arose out of the self-organized Protestant communities of the 17th and 18th centuries, and took over the state during the U.S. War of Independence, Russian society now consists of a conglomerate of structures inherited from its different stages of development. Some structures are the result of grassroots self-organization, others were created from above (by the state),

and still others were facilitated from outside by Western donors. How will that conglomerate evolve into civil society?

For one thing, its goals will differ from the goals of Western civil societies. It is already clear that the Russian state is sometimes more European than are the structures of civil society. The values of a market economy and procedural democracy may even be alien to Russian society. However, this society is the only environment generating Russian civil society.

The major aim of Russian civil society is not to achieve independence from the state but to reverse the relationship that has existed for centuries and thus establish societal control over the state. Such a reversal would have dramatic consequences (although these will be less dramatic than, for instance, in Turkey, where society remains more distant from civil activity).

Russian reformers face a difficult choice. Russia's future road must be either a modernization of the country with all the right recipes, but one where the state remains the major tool of reform, or a structural reform in state-society relations that will quite probably lead to a leftist comeback and clear limits to the country's development. Khodorkovsky's left turn is thus not so much a turn for Russia but a new historical crossroads, representing a choice between state modernization and the building of civil society. While the second path might, perhaps counterintuitively, look more promising, Russia has throughout its history always chosen the first one.