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Russia and Eurasia Meeting Summary

Trends in Civil Society in Russia

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This is a summary of an event held at Chatham House on 16 April 2013. Yuri Dzhibladze discussed recent developments in civil society in Russia.

Civil society organizations in Russia are currently living through challenging times. Recent crackdowns on NGOs, which include government inspections and hefty fines, have threatened organizations' ability to operate. During recent weeks NGOs have become the subject of news headlines in Russia, as more than 500 organizations have faced inspections ostensibly for issues such as health and fire safety. Organizations that have been found in violation of these laws face high fines that may force them into bankruptcy. The recent crackdowns come as part of a new effort to silence Russian civil society. This includes legislation passed during the summer of 2012 that forces any vaguely politically-oriented organization that receives foreign grants to register as a 'foreign agent,' a term that carries subversive connotations. In addition, legislation limiting freedom of assembly, increasing the punishment for defamation, and allowing for the blacklisting of websites allegedly seen as dangerous to children have made civil society members uneasy.

The goal of the recent crackdowns and the strict legislation is to discredit civil society in the eyes of the Russian public. This comes as a result of the opposition protests in 2011-12, which attempted to 'delegitimize' the Putin government in the wake of electoral fraud and accusations of corruption. Up to this point, the 'orange paranoia' that had plagued the relationship between the Russian government and civil society following the 'coloured revolutions' in some former Soviet states had softened slightly. Recent opposition protests, however, have seen the return of government intimidation. There are currently over 100 investigators looking into the 2012 protests, and prosecutors are searching for connections between the protests and NGOs. Individual members of the opposition have also found themselves under investigation. Many members of the opposition Coordinating Council, including Alexei Navalny, are currently facing criminal charges.

The result of recent events is that NGOs have begun to engage in self-censorship, and some foreign donors have had to withdraw funding. USAID, for example, was forced out of Russia in 2012. Foreign civil society organizations engaged in partnerships with Russian groups also need to take into consideration the safety of their Russian colleagues when conducting work or publishing information. It is impossible for NGOs engaged in issues such as anti-corruption or human rights to receive funding from within Russia, so limiting access to foreign funding or support weakens these organizations.

In response to the Russian claim that the 'foreign agent' law aims to prevent Islamic extremist groups from receiving foreign funding, it was argued that there must be a balance between security concerns and openness. States such as Britain must also confront the problem of how to ensure security while protecting freedom of assembly and freedom of speech. The problem with this legislation in Russia stems from the fact that Russia lacks an independent judiciary – a means by which civil society may defend itself from government intrusion. The Presidential Human Rights Council has ceased to be an effective promoter of civil society in Russia. Recent changes in the selection process for it have meant that a large proportion of members are Kremlin supporters or representatives of government-organized NGOs.

One positive effect of the recent legislation has been that there is now more solidarity between political and non-political civil society groups. Though the government's intent had been to increase discord between these groups, the outcome has been the opposite. Russian society in general is neither stubbornly conservative nor pro-Kremlin. If there were to be a truly free exchange of ideas between Kremlin supporters and opposition members, the Russian public would be receptive to liberal ideas, and supportive of a strong independent civil society.