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‘I’ve Seen This Before’: What Failed Democratization Can Teach Us About Democratic Erosion

Civil society — the lifeblood of democracy or just an illusion?

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Civil society has long been recognized as a vital component of a healthy democracy. From Alexis de Tocqueville’s 1835 study Democracy in America to contemporary research on democratization, the concept of civil society has played a central role in shaping our understanding of democratic publics.[i] Juan Linz and Alfred Stepan, whose work shaped generations of comparative political scientists studying democratic transitions and erosion, famously argue that civil society is an inherent part of democratic consolidation. In their “Problems of Democratic Transitions and Consolidation,” they state:

> By civil society we refer to that arena of the polity where self-organizing groups/ movements, and individuals, relatively autonomous from the state, attempt to articulate values, create associations and solidarities, and advance their interests.[ii]

Despite its prominence, the concept of civil society remains contested and imprecise. There are two interrelated approaches to understanding it commonly found. The first adopts a narrow view, defining civil society as a collection of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that bring citizens together in pursuit of shared interests and goals—an approach that lends itself more readily to empirical evaluation.[iii] The second approach defines civil society more broadly, emphasizing citizens’ capacity for cooperation, civic-mindedness, tolerance, and mutual respect—an understanding that is more philosophical and normative in nature.[iv]

These two approaches are interconnected and arguably reinforcing. Furthermore, this strengthened social capital — which the World Bank defines as the “institutions, relationships, and norms that shape the quality and quantity of a society's social interactions” — influences public participation in and interactions with NGOs and strengthens commitment to democratic

processes.[v] Linz and Stepan offer the following as components of civil society – social movements (women's group, neighborhood associations, religious groupings, and intellectual organizations) and civic associations from all societal strata (such as trade unions, entrepreneurial groups, journalists, or lawyers). [vi]

While it is widely acknowledged that not all NGOs promote civic-mindedness or tolerance, democratization policies nonetheless continue to place high value on fostering civil society activity in emerging democracies.[vii] NGOs can advance democratization in transitioning societies by providing additional services in sectors where governmental institutions fail, facilitating the communication between public and private sectors, and increasing transparency and trust between various sectors of society, among other functions. As such, promotion of NGOs, including grant support for educational, journalistic, and cultural associations and groups in newly democratizing states has been one of the pillars of the democratic promotion policies of the United States, other countries, and developmental agencies within the United Nations and the World Bank. This approach was particularly prominent in the post–Cold War period, especially in relation to the countries of Eastern Europe and the former Soviet republics.

How Putin muzzled Russia's civil society

The policies of glasnost under Mikhail Gorbachev marked the initial opening of civil society in the Soviet Union, laying the groundwork for what would become the most open period in modern Russian history. Building on this foundation, President Boris Yeltsin's liberalization and democratization policies appeared to signal a new era for the Russian political system. The euphoria that followed the USSR's collapse seemed to imply that real democratic development in Russia was possible, if not inevitable.

Studies of Russian public opinion showed reason for optimism. In this context, it became essential to assess the viability of civil society in Russia and to promote the healthy development of social capital by supporting the non-governmental and non-commercial "third sector" within the Russian polity.[viii] The principles of democratic civil society appeared to be present in Russian society, even if these principles were, in the words of James Gibson, "a mile wide and an inch deep."[ix] Scholars were hopeful and argued that with proper political reforms, a vibrant civil society in Russia was possible. Thus, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), among others, contributed millions of dollars to the propagation of international, professionally organized NGOs in Russia.

Yet, by the mid-2000s, both scholars and donors began to question the viability and effectiveness of the "third sector" in Russia. Several studies pointed out that foreign aid to Russian NGOs did not always yield the intended outcomes—particularly in fostering genuine, domestically rooted grassroots activism.[x] To some extent, engagement with NGOs revealed underlying social and economic divides in Russian society—those who were younger, urban, educated, and had access to travel were more likely to support civil society initiatives. Yet Russia remained a notable outlier compared to neighboring countries like Georgia and Ukraine, where civil society not only flourished but actively challenged authoritarian tendencies in their respective regimes.

In the early 2000s, the Second Chechen War against Ichkerian separatists in the

North Caucasus enabled Vladimir Putin's rise to the presidency and helped him consolidate power. While still a relatively unknown deputy to President Yeltsin, Putin was propelled into prominence by his hardline stance on the conflict, consistently referring to Chechen fighters as terrorists. A few months before his triumphant election in March 2000, during a press conference on Sept. 24, 1999, he laid out his uncompromising approach in blunt, vulgar terms: "We will hunt them down and whack them in the shithouse [xi]." With this rhetoric, Putin began carefully cultivating his image as a strongman of stability—someone who would restore order, assert control, and decisively confront the threats that had plagued Russia throughout the 1990s.

Since taking office in 2000, Putin has viewed independent civil society with deep skepticism, seeing it as a potential source of instability. The first prominent step in dealing with civil society was though control of independent media. In 2001, the newly created Gazprom Media group began to take over independent media outlets, like NTV. The Color Revolutions in Georgia (2003) and Ukraine (2004) reinforced this perception, prompting him to treat civil society organizations—especially those with foreign funding—as a "fifth column." Beginning in 2004, he moved decisively to subvert the influence of foreign-sponsored NGOs in Russia, driven by growing state distrust of their activities, donors, and perceived political agendas. The 2006 NGO Law required organizations to register with the state and granted authorities wide discretion to deny or revoke that registration. Groups such as the Russian–Chechen Friendship Society were among the first to be shut down under its provisions.

Putin returned to the presidency in 2012 sparked massive "Russia without Putin" protests which introduced the new generation of Russian political activist like Alexei Navalny. The Kremlin intensified its efforts to stifle civil society. The 2012 Foreign Agent Law required NGOs receiving foreign funding and engaging in vaguely defined "political activity" to register as foreign agents, reinforcing state surveillance and stigmatization. In early 2014, Putin further tightened the framework, and by 2015, the "Undesirable Organizations" Law enabled the state to ban foreign NGOs, including Memorial, Agora, the Open Society Foundations, and the National Endowment for Democracy.

The crackdown deepened in the midst of the pandemic in 2020 when the Foreign Agent Law was expanded to include individual activists, journalists, and civic actors. In 2021, independent media outlets such as Meduza and VTimes were designated foreign agents, losing advertisers and facing heightened surveillance. In parallel, the same year, the Kremlin escalated its repression by labeling opposition leader Alexei Navalny's AntiCorruption Foundation (FBK), his Citizens' Rights Protection Foundation, and his network of regional headquarters as "extremist organizations." A Moscow City Court officially declared the FBK extremist in June 2021, which banned its activities and barred members from elections-.[xii] Membership or affiliation with these groups can now result in criminal prosecution and prison sentences of up to 12 years.[xiii]

The crackdown on foreign agents also included Putin war on academics and education institutions. Curtailing western influence on the minds of young Russians first appeared in the controversial temporary closure of the European University at St. Petersburgh for alleged fire violations. The University's crime was cooperation and acceptance of grants from European Commission. Since 2016, the number of students expelled for their political views and activity increased exponentially.[xiv] These numbers have increased even more since the

full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Russia administration has openly targeted "liberal arts" programs at top Russian universities, disbanding and firing the faculties of political science. In 2022, The Russian Ministry of Education approved the Patriotic Curriculum Reform for all levels of education, which will focus on "traditional values" and state-approved versions of history. That same year, Russia exited the Bologna process, severing ties with European institutions. In June of 2025, the U.S.-based Association for Slavic, Eastern European, and Eurasian Studies was designated as undesirable organization by the Russian Ministry of Justice.[xv]

When "crisis" justifies control: National security vs. civil society

In comparative politics—particularly in the study of countries where freedoms are threatened by authoritarian rule—it is common to observe national security or states of emergency being used to consolidate power in the hands of the executive. What qualifies as a national crisis? Nearly anything: a financial crisis or economic collapse, anti-government protests, a refugee influx, or a terrorist attack have all been framed as existential threats to justify extraordinary measures.

In 2016, following a failed coup attempt in July, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan invoked emergency powers to bypass the legislature and judiciary, enacting a wave of repressive measures. Hundreds of associations were shut down for alleged ties to terrorist organizations, the civil service and judiciary were purged, media outlets closed with journalists jailed, universities shuttered, thousands of academics dismissed, and foreign scholars banned from travel.

Meanwhile, between 2011 and 2015, the onset of the Syrian civil war triggered a mass movement of refugees into Europe, many transiting through Hungary. In 2015, Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán declared that this was not a "refugee crisis" but an "invasion," and used it to justify declaring a state of emergency. NGOs assisting refugees were branded "foreign agents," due process for asylum seekers was curtailed, and the 2018 "Stop Soros" law criminalized assistance to undocumented migrants. These measures were sharply criticized by the European Union (EU) and the European Court of Human Rights, and in 2019, Hungary became the first EU member state to be downgraded from "Free" in global democratic rankings. Today, Hungary is the only Partly Free country in the European Union. Out of a top score of 100, Hungary's total is 65, while Turkey tallies 33, Russia comes in at 12, and the United States is 84.[xvi]

The use of crisis narratives to justify crackdowns on civil society is not foreign to the United States either. One need only recall the sweeping powers granted by the Patriot Act after 9/11. Whether the so-called immigration crisis and protests against ICE actions across the country will provide grounds for the executive branch to consolidate power beyond its constitutional limits remains to be seen. Yet, lessons from elsewhere suggest a troubling precedent.

The rebranding of academic freedom as ideological extremism, denying entry to students and academics, the use of federal funding as political leverage to discipline dissenting institutions, and the suppression of speech in the name of national security are tactics drawn straight from the authoritarian playbook. In 2025 alone, the Trump administration has frozen billions in federal research funding to institutions including Harvard, Columbia, and the University of Pennsylvania, citing alleged failures to combat antisemitism or comply with ideological demands. At the same time, public broadcasters like NPR and PBS

have faced defunding campaigns for purported liberal bias, further muzzling the independent civic voices. These moves reflect a broader strategy to undermine the very associations "autonomous from the state, [that] attempt to articulate values, create solidarities." and speak truth to power.

In the next episode in this series, I will explore the role of Political Society—an arena closely intertwined with Civil Society. If Civil Society is the space where values and ideas are nurtured through associations, solidarities, and shared commitments, then Political Society is where those values take flight, entering the arena of political competition for power.

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