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Civil Society as the Cornerstone of a New Global Community

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I WOULD LIKE TO take this opportunity to thank the hosts for inviting me to participate in this most distinguished meeting. I would also like to say that I am especially pleased to speak on this particular panel, for at least two reasons. First, because I'm speaking together with my Asian colleagues, I feel that Russia is recognized here as an Asian country, which is not always the case at such meetings. Second, my presence implies that the idea of civil society is not perceived as totally alien to Russia and Russian culture, despite all the remaining vestiges of the old communist system.

Now, if we take the theme of today's conference—globalization, governance, and civil society—and apply it to the case of postcommunist countries, the key issue for them is, of course, governance. Governance is the problem for Russia as well as for all other states that experience the transition from totalitarianism to democracy. Indeed, in response to the question of why a country with such economic resources and human potential as Russia is in the process of continued economic decline, one can point only to the fact that it has very poor governance.

I would like to emphasize three aspects of the governance problem as I see them in postcommunist states. First is the problem of the quality of state bureaucrats. As Stalin once stated, "cadres decide all." If you look at the pool of cadres that the newly democratized states of Europe and Asia can draw upon for their state-building purposes, you will see that the quality of these cadres is low. You can not even call them "bureaucrats" in

the classic Weberian sense of the word, because they lack some key characteristics of traditional bureaucrats. And, of course, they are by far inferior to traditional bureaucrats in East Asian countries.

A second problem of governance is the evident absence of legitimate and accepted procedures and institutions. The decision-making process in postcommunist countries tends to be messy and chaotic. And as we know, democracy is not only about freedom but also about procedures and institutions. If you look at the governmental structures in most postcommunist countries, you will find much functional overlap, a lot of bureaucratic competition, a clear lack of legitimacy of major state institutions, a wasteful fight for power, and other characteristics typical of the transition period.

Last but not least, I would like to underscore the very low mobilization potential of postcommunist states. Indeed, states structures in the postcommunist world are largely detached, operating in isolation of or insulated from the societies they are intended to serve. Therefore, these societies do not perceive states as legitimate representatives of their interests. In the Russian case, for example, one can see that all attempts by the state to forge a national ideology, or to unite Russian society behind a limited set of ideological goals, have failed miserably.

I would venture to say that states in postcommunist countries are still quasistates, protostates, or would-be states. Or perhaps one might better describe them as virtual states, because they lack some of the essential characteristics of modern states. In many cases, they do not control their financial systems, in other cases they do not control borders, and in still other cases they do not control militancy on their own territory. This really creates problems as well as opportunities for civil society institutions. The question and the challenge to civil society is whether its institutions can fill the gap left by the decline of states, that is, whether they can fulfill some governance functions. In this sense, it is extremely important to define the role of civil society in the process of state-building. I would like to emphasize in particular the role of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in democratization and conflict prevention on the territory of postcommunist states.

Democratization and conflict prevention are such broad and ambiguous goals that almost any activity undertaken by NGOs and governmental assistance agencies on the territory of the former Soviet Union can be interpreted as an effort to meet these goals. It may be argued that democratization and conflict prevention are inherently linked to privatization

and business development, public education and social science support, environmental and energy problem solving, defense conversion and military reforms, third-sector building, and support of an independent media.

The precise definition of the integral elements leading to democratization and conflict prevention, and thus which activities should receive special attention and preferential treatment from Western NGOs and governmental assistance agencies, already constitute a serious problem. It goes without saying that the agenda for democratization and conflict prevention can not be limitless, and that it should be separated from other main assistance programs such as those supporting economic transformation, many educational projects, and gender-related programs. Such a separation does not mean that democratization and privatization are unconnected, but rather that these are two interrelated but separate sets of issues that often require different approaches, mechanisms, partners, and so on. Moreover, it would be reasonable to assert that democratization and conflict prevention are the two areas demanding the most delicate NGO strategies because they touch upon the most sensitive and politically heated concerns of recipient countries: state-building and security policies.

Attempts have been made to go further and to define a rigid mandate for "democracy support" or programs of "conflict resolution"—a sort of exclusive list that would guide assistance in these two fields, including drafting legislation, promoting self-governance, helping political parties, mediating conflicts, and offering consulting services to state leaders. However, given the extremely vague political landscapes in most post-communist societies, characterized by weak systems of state institutions and embryonic political parties, such attempts might be highly arbitrary. Moreover, they might lead to an overly formalistic approach that overlooks what is really important though not always visible in democratization and conflict prevention. For example, the development of the third sector in the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) is often regarded as something less urgent than the task of building modern Western-style political parties. However, in post-Soviet societies today, NGOs are much more active in promoting and disseminating democratic values, norms, and institutions than political parties and movements.

In some cases, overly direct and explicit attempts at democratization and conflict prevention cause local elites to be suspicious and mistrustful, open assistance programs to accusations of having hidden agendas, and cause local institutions involved in their implementation to be regarded

as compradors. Therefore, the more sensitive the matter is, the more ambiguity is appropriate.

Approaches used to evaluate the success of NGO activities employ widely varying criteria. Some institutions tend to link any "positive" developments—e.g., the defeat of communists in the presidential elections in Russia in 1996, the launching of meaningful economic reform programs in the Ukraine, and the adoption of the new Kazakhstan Constitution—on the territory of the former USSR with their own programs. However, it is hard to verify any direct causal relationship between NGO activities and the above-mentioned developments, because too many other factors influence CIS countries' political and economic transformations. Furthermore, which particular developments in the post-Soviet space are in actuality "positive" also remains unclear. This is because success criteria often become a function of the particular ideologies of donors, who themselves might have somewhat limited political and cultural perspectives.

Another approach is to avoid specifying any explicit indicators of success, instead referring to such general criteria as "changes in public opinion," "emerging new attitudes," and "legal culture development." The emphasis is on deep societal changes in the target countries rather than on particular policies, immediate expectations are not too high, and assistance programs are regarded as long-term investments. Opponents to such an approach would argue that it inhibits any meaningful evaluation and disguises poor project performance and the waste of money.

A third approach, which is probably the most common among both NGOs and Western governmental assistance agencies, tries to use specific and quantitative criteria, for example, geographical diversity of projects, number of local partner institutions involved, number of applications received, and number of individuals attending training sessions, among others. The problems with this approach are exactly those of any attempt to quantify social reality, chiefly, formal criteria often fail to reflect the substantive side of programs. For instance, the number of participants in a training session does not reveal anything about the quality or impact of the session, and the number of local NGOs involved is probably irrelevant in countries where NGOs are still controlled by the state. On top of this, a focus on quantitative criteria sometimes leads to the choosing of easy targets both in terms of stated goals and local partners.

Yet another tricky criterion of efficiency is sustainability, i.e., the ability of local institutions to continue certain activities once the foreign money is withdrawn or cut significantly. The notion of "pilot projects," which in

theory can later be replicated using local resources, looks very appealing indeed. However, in reality the transition may be difficult. First, even big businesses in the CIS continue to be highly unstable, which basically prohibits their long-term and consistent support of NGOs; indeed, the most that indigenous NGOs can hope for are one-time grants with no further commitments. Second, in charting the charitable undertakings of CIS businesses one can easily trace an intention to get more "bang for the buck" in terms of publicity and exposure. Therefore, most investments are made in large-scale, highly visible events, e.g., concerts, international stars, films presentations, and sport events. In this sense, CIS NGOs experience difficulty in "selling" their programs to potential sponsors because most NGO activities fail to elicit an immediate public response. Finally, in the CIS the transition from foreign to indigenous support is complicated by psychological factors: NGOs that operate on foreign charitable money are often perceived as agents of outside influence or as something artificial, implanted from the outside and therefore not deserving of domestic support.

An important criterion that is nevertheless not widely discussed is the eventual impact of assistance programs on donor countries. Ideally, such programs should not only help the recipient societies but also generate spin-off effects for donors, which are not limited to direct foreign policy interests but also include area studies promotion, Western NGOs and for-profits development, cultural exchange, and so on. Certainly, this is a sensitive issue: the institutional interests of a given assistance managing body do not necessarily coincide with the more general goals of the program in question—e.g., large contractors tend to keep costs very high, boost the number of Western staff, and charge huge overheads.

In short, there seem to be no magic evaluation mechanisms for Western assistance programs on the territory of the former Soviet Union. Part of the problem derives from the fact that CIS countries are moving targets: political and economic environments for assistance programs might change dramatically overnight; projects might have to revise their initial goals and aspirations midstream as they accumulate more information, reducing or upgrading their ambitions accordingly. However, this is not to say that no ways exist to evaluate particular projects. One possible evaluation method, which is not often used, is to evaluate a given project in terms of a similar one run by an analogous NGO or state agency. The wide variety of Western institutions operating on the territory of the former Soviet Union during the past seven years provides a database

capable of supporting a serious comparative analysis of a given NGO's successes and failures.

Another rather trivial suggestion is to make assistance programs more transparent to the public, in both the donor and the recipient countries. This transparency should include not only public access to project reports and documentation, but also freer competitions and contract tenders. A new degree of transparency could make it easier to evaluate assistance programs, as well as reduce their costs and promote public support of them in donor and recipient countries.

Regarding potential partnerships with local NGOs, I would single out two different types of post-Soviet institutions both claiming to represent the present core and the future of NGO activities in the former Soviet republics. The first type can be termed "systemic" NGOs, i.e., those institutions that used to be integrated into the old Soviet system and enjoyed significant financial, logistical, and political support from the state in exchange for loyalty and a readiness to follow the party line in their undertakings. Only minor deviations from the party line were tolerated, with such deviations intended primarily for Western consumption. By definition, the range of problems that these NGOs were allowed to address was limited, including invalids' and veterans' rights, women's issues, environmental problems, cultural preservation, and the advancement of technical knowledge.

The second type, best described as "dissident," from the very beginning opposed the Soviet state. Not surprisingly, NGOs of this type experienced numerous hardships: they were often persecuted by the Soviet authorities, and their leaders and activists were often detained, imprisoned, or expelled from the country. Naturally, dissident NGOs were involved primarily in human rights matters, although essentially any group in any field—e.g., the environment, the promotion of local culture or language, and the fight against nuclear war—could fit into the category of dissident NGO if it honestly and consistently pursued its goals.

Clearly, the former type of NGO described above had much better starting conditions after the Soviet collapse. Several systemic institutions were able to preserve their infrastructure, a number of their personnel, extensive ties with foreign partners, important connections within the post-Soviet establishment, and so on. While the dissident NGOs were much more legitimate in the eyes of the newly democratizing public as well as in the West, their material resources and infrastructural capacities were in most cases limited. Moreover, even after 1991 many of the former

dissident NGOs chose to remain in opposition to the state, no matter how democratic and benign the new post-Soviet states appeared to be. Such a position is not necessarily appreciated by governmental officials in Russia and other CIS countries.

The third group of potential partners deserving special attention are local for-profit organizations. As a rule, these organizations are more flexible and adaptable than NGOs, and in some cases they are more reliable partners and oftentimes more efficient in implementing specific programs with clearly defined goals.

I do not think that the position of civil society is bleak in Russia and other post-communist states. I believe it was Nietzsche who once commented that Wagner's music was not as bad as it sounded. Similarly, I feel that the situation with civil society is probably not as bad as it sometimes looks. In fact, despite all their deficiencies and liabilities NGOs still exhibit more flexibility than state institutions, they demonstrate more idealism and suffer less from corruption, and, finally, they often exude more energy and vitality than political parties and most state structures. Indeed, I think it is not far afield to compare the relationship between the state and NGOs in the field of public policy with the relationship between the state and the private sector in the field of economics. Of course, NGOs and other civil society institutions can not replace the state, but they can compete successfully with it in specific areas.

Now, allow me to briefly pinpoint the areas in which I think civil society institutions can assist and complement the state governance of post-communist societies. First of all, I think that civil society institutions will continue to be watchdogs of state governance and democracy, pointing out present problems and indicating potential issues looming on the horizon. Obviously, this is something that they can do much better than state institutions. Such problems might be related to the environment, to human rights, to religion, and to issues of public morale and public health.

Second, NGOs might become at some point important "preparatory schools" for future politicians and governmental officials. In this regard, I point to the career of the speaker yesterday who began a career many years ago as an activist and then went on to become an important governmental official in Malaysia. Similar career progressions are likely to occur in our countries, as well, because NGO careers will offer a fresh perspective and another dimension to future state officials. In this sense, an NGO experience may prove to be very functional.

Third, and also very important, I think that some NGOs can complement state structures at levels and in ways typically beyond the reach of the state. In Russia, for example, I believe civil society institutions have a bright future in the fields of territorial public self-governance and of community-building at the grass-roots level, because the state simply can not extend its reach this far and substitute public self-governance with its own institutions, although it might try.

Finally, and most intriguing to me, some advanced, mature NGOs and other civil society institutions in general can feasibly do more than just compete with state structures—they could even replace the state in some fields. And here again I would like to compare the relationship between the state and civil society in the field of public policy with that between the state and private business in the field of economics. It is likely that we will see a "privatization" of some social functions that have been traditional preserves of the state. And such privatization, if properly handled by NGOs, probably will be for the better. For example, some social functions of the state now could be delegated to civil society institutions in the fields of education, of environmental control, and of preserving culture and the historical heritage.

Let me conclude by saying that state officials and international bureaucrats tend to take a very condescending view of civil society, especially NGOs. From their perspective, NGOs are not serious, reliable, or stable enough, and they are unable to take responsibility. However, these attitudes appear to be changing. And once we enter the age of information, of globalization, and of multiple identities, it might well be that the stone initially rejected by the builders will indeed become the very cornerstone of a new global community.