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THE YELTSIN FOUNDATION

Russian Civil Society Symposium: Building Bridges to the Future

Working Description

April 1-4, 2014

Schloss Leopoldskron, Salzburg, Austria

Overview

Since the 1990s, a more active and open civil society sector has developed across the Russian Federation. While civil society institutions and civic engagement in Russia are not new, the growth of the sector in recent years has created hopes that Russian civil society could become the voice for a more effective democratic system, more efficient social services, and a check against corruption and centralized power. At the same time, the increasing interconnectivity between Russian and international civil society institutions created a sense of optimism that an interconnected “Euro-Atlantic civil society” could make positive contributions to difficult geo-political challenges.

Of late, however, these hopes have largely been put on hold. Russian civil society institutions are facing a variety of political and social pressures, and are becoming less connected to international partners. Geo-political relations between Russia and the Euro-Atlantic community have worsened, and international civil society groups and donors have become the object of suspicion as instruments of external interference. At a political level, prior optimism about a “re-set” in Russia-Euro-Atlantic relations has faltered, with diminishing hopes for a denouement in the near term.

This has created an urgent need to rebuild bridges between Russia, Europe and the United States, and to reestablish a serious dialogue about the role of Russian civil society and its relationship to its international partners.

In partnership with and with the generous support of the Yeltsin Presidential Center, a *Russian Civil Society Symposium* will be held at the Salzburg Global Seminar from April 1 to 4, 2014. The Symposium will address the challenges and opportunities currently facing civil society in Russia as a means to understand the needs and perspective of Russian civil society groups and to consider new approaches to international civil society engagement with Russia. The Symposium will include representatives of civil society, informal actors, foundations, businesses, the media, and other groups, and will focus on questions of governance, transparency, justice, social services, education, and the role of culture and the arts. Specific case studies will be commissioned in advance of the Symposium.

The Symposium

The Russian Civil Society Symposium will examine the development of civil society in the Russian Federation to assess priorities, issues, and current challenges. Short case studies will be commissioned in advance and will form the basis of comparative analysis for the Symposium in Salzburg. Participants will critically examine the Post-Soviet experience while making connections and comparisons with the Euro-Atlantic context and identifying concrete options to strengthen civil society based on practical experience. The Symposium will facilitate a deeper understanding of the changing power dynamics between government, business, and other actors and to identify new modalities for civil society interventions, including the role of social media.

Embedding cross-regional exchange and innovation within this program, Salzburg Global Seminar will create a platform to engage a broader range of civil society organizations, foundations, think tanks, multi-stakeholder bodies, universities and leading organizations committed to civil society innovation and development.

Like all Salzburg Global Seminar programs, participants will come together on equal footing, regardless of age, affiliation, religion, background, or origin. The session will bring together approximately 50 top practitioners, thinkers and leaders from diverse sectors, institutions, governments and businesses. Participants will include policy experts; politicians, government and regional officials; business, social and financial entrepreneurs; economists; educators and bodies representing youth, gender, and ethnic minorities. Participants will also be invited from specific regions and nations experiencing similar challenges.

The Symposium will employ a combination of methodologies to fully engage participants and facilitate open, critical, and constructive dialogue. The agenda will include moderated plenary sessions combining brief presentations of key questions with robust discussion. It will also include thematically focused working groups to examine specific ideas, case studies, and strategies in greater detail. Participants will share experiences and information from their own countries and contexts, i.e. what has – and has not – been effective in building and sustaining a robust civil society sector that can respond to rapidly changing contexts, support local needs, and collaborate with international efforts. Within the discussions attention will be given to opportunities to create a more effective enabling environment for the sector.

Symposium Outcomes

The goal of the Russian Civil Society Program is to improve understanding among civil society leaders across social, cultural, and political boundaries in Russia and the Euro-Atlantic community. This will lead to more effective interventions between civil society institutions, create a foundation for improved relations between civil society institutions, create a more productive understanding of the limitations and challenges facing Russian civil institutions and their international partners, and establish strategies to overcome those challenges.

The Symposium will facilitate robust and informed exchanges on the current state of civil society in Russia, including the challenges facing civil society institutions and their long-term effectiveness and sustainability. It will also build an understanding of how the lessons of the last twenty years can inform new directions for civil society institutions and actors, and it will examine whether the Russian experience can be used to inform other transition challenges currently facing the

international community. Participants will develop practical recommendations for what governments, businesses, educational institutions and activists can do to nourish strong engagement and civil society organizations.

Participants in the Symposium will come from different sectors and organizations across multiple regions to:

- Identify the key factors and necessary legal, economic, and societal frameworks needed to sustain strong civic engagement;
- Build a platform of practitioners and critical thinkers that focuses on addressing critical social needs in health, education, culture, the challenges of aging populations, youth development, issues of rights and justice, and environmental concerns;
- Stimulate fresh thinking on how individuals, businesses, political institutions, educational systems, and others can forge a more robust civil society in Russia, reflective of past experiences and current realities; and
- Consider the possibilities and challenges facing civil society in Track II diplomacy, given current tensions between the Russian government and its European and North American counterparts.

Key questions that will drive the agenda include:

- What is the role of domestic and international donors in supporting civil society?
- How do legal frameworks underpin or constrain civil society?
- What types of domestic and international fora and dialogues can best support civil society (and why have some been ineffective)?
- What is the role of new 'informal actors' in Russian civil society and what is their relationship to more established actors?

Symposium outcomes will include the establishment of a network of civil society leaders that can exchange ideas and work collaboratively to tackle problems facing civil society in Russia and the Euro-Atlantic community. In addition, the Symposium will publish a written report reflecting the key issues and critical ideas shared at the Symposium, including brief position papers and suggestions for further work. Additionally, brief interviews with representatives from different regions will be captured and shared, expanding the current debate about the role and promise of civil society in the region.

An important benefit for participants is the opportunity to form new networks that can increase their own effectiveness as change agents in their home countries and institutions. The Salzburg Global Network numbers over 25,000 alumni in 150 countries, many now in senior leadership positions. It provides an online and events-based forum to nurture these ongoing relationships and connect members from different generations and sectors for crowd-sourcing ideas, strategy assessment, mentoring and support.

During the Symposium, the Salzburg Global Seminar will, subject to the use of the Chatham House Rule, publish daily session newsletters with session summaries, in-depth reviews, and best quotes and share key messages and reactions via a variety of social media tools including blogging and twitter. Following the Symposium, the Salzburg Global Seminar will prepare social media pieces for

our own sites and for participants to easily disseminate outcomes via their professional networks, distribute a summary via all our session partners to share the outcomes with their networks, and build a list of related organizations' fora where we can send or present the findings.

About the Salzburg Global Seminar

Salzburg Global Seminar (www.salzburgglobal.org) designs, facilitates and hosts international strategic convening to drive progress based on Imagination, Sustainability and Justice. Founded in 1947, this independent non-profit organization has brought nearly 32,000 participants together from over 160 countries and territories for more than 500 programs in Schloss Leopoldskron, Austria, and beyond. Our inspiring venue is a place where ideas matter and where those seeking a better world find common ground.

Salzburg Global's program strategy is driven by our mission - to challenge present and future leaders to solve issues of global concern. We work with partners to help individuals, organizations and governments tackle systems challenges critical for future generations and accelerate the translation of knowledge into action.

Salzburg Global programs connect practitioners, thinkers and emerging leaders across national, cultural and professional boundaries to 're-imagine the possible'. Given the complexity of cross-border, interdependent problems raised by globalization, these personal connections and commitment to innovation are vital for regions and sectors in transition. Salzburg Global provides a neutral platform where participants can analyze blockages, identify shared goals, test and refine ideas, and create new networks and strategies for long-term results.