# SOCIAL DIALOGUE IN RUSSIA AND THE CIVIC CHAMBER OF THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION

The social dialogue in Russia has deep roots and long-standing traditions. Traditional institutions of civil society existed historically both in the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union: trade unions, children’s, youth and women’s organizations, mass media etc. Some of them were an authorative voice on a national and international level. For instance, in 1961 a non-governmental organization entitled *Soviet Fund for Peace* was established. It was financed solely by donations of ordinary citizens, enterprises and civil society associations. The *Soviet Fund for Peace*, known nowadays as the *Russian Fund for Peace*, became an influential NGO both in Russia and abroad pushing ahead the global civil society movement towards disarmament, peace, stability and mutual confidence.

Of course, the situation has radically changed at the turn of the century in the non-commercial sector with the globalization, thriving of new technologies, liberalization and new areas for civil society action. The civil society in Russia has entered into a new stage with enhanced social dialogue and solidarity.

The Russian government and intellectual elite have realized that a mature solid civil society is vital for national well-being and prosperity of the country. Still, such a civil society should be based on the middle class like in the leading developed countries. In the last twenty years numerous Russian NGOs focused on human rights, environmental issues and protection of children, youth and women have been settled in Russia. They are extending their network ties with similar organizations around the world and slowly but surely influence the decision-making process at the federal, regional and local levels. Gender equality issues are also effectively tackled as Russian women are gaining space and momentum both in the government, political parties, business and non-commercial sector.

Aspiring to create regular platform and coordinating body for these segmented and sometimes sporadic and chaotic public activities, the government has decided to establish the Civic Chamber of the Russian Federation as an organized civil society institution to promote effective and mutually beneficial dialogue between citizens and the State.

## Mission and goals

The Civic Chamber of the Russian Federation (CCRF) was established on April 4, 2005 by the Federal Law №32 “On the Civic Chamber of the Russian Federation” to secure effective channels for dialogue and interaction between Russian citizens and federal, regional and local authorities so that the interests and demands of the civil society are taken into account while elaborating national policies in different fields.

The Civic Chamber sets among others the following priorities:

1. Engaging citizens and NGOs in the implementation of governmental policies;
2. Putting forward and supporting civil society initiatives of national importance for Russia to promote human rights, basic freedoms and legitimate interests of Russian citizens;
3. Conducting public expertise of federal and regional bills of the Russian Federation, as well as draft regulations of Russian governing bodies and local authorities;
4. Exerting public control over the activities of the Russian government, federal, regional and local authorities;
5. Drawing up recommendations for Russian authorities in the shaping of the national policies to develop non-commercial sector and to promote mature civil society in Russia;
6. Providing informational, methodological and other forms of support to the regional civic chambers of the Russian Federation;
7. Engaging citizens, NGOs and mass media in discussions on freedom of speech and press, right to spread information by all legal means and human rights protection in Russia;
8. Developing international cooperation and participating in the activities of international organizations, multilateral conferences, meetings and other events of civil society dimension.

## Formation

The Civic Chamber consists of 126 members working on a voluntary basis, with their term of office of 3 years (prior to 2011 – 2 years).

The CCRF is formed in three stages. First, following consultations with national NGOs and other civil society organizations the President of the Russian Federation appoints 42 members of the Chamber, selected among eminent public figures. Second, the 42 members already approved by the President elect via preferential voting another 42 members among candidates nominated by all-Russian civil society associations and NGOs. Third, 84 members of the CCRF choose 42 representatives from regional and inter-regional organizations from each of the 8 federal districts of Russia.

### Structure

Each convocation of the CCRF establishes Commissions, main working bodies to deal with pressing issues of social and economic development. Each member of the CCRF may enter at least one Commission with a casting vote and may join any other Commission with a right of deliberative vote.

There are total 12 Commissions, 5 Inter-Commission Working Groups and 3 Research Institutes in the actual structure of the Chamber:

### *Commissions*

* Commission on issues of civil society development
* Commission on economic development and support of entrepreneurship
* Commission on regional development and local governance
* Commission on public control over law-enforcement and juridical system reform
* Commission on communications, information policy and freedom of speech in mass media
* Commission on development of education
* Commission on inter-ethnic relations and freedom of conscience
* Commission on social issues and demographic policy
* Commission on science and innovations
* Commission on preservation and development of national culture
* Commission on health care, environmental protection, promotion of physical training and sports
* Commission on promotion of charity and volunteerism

### *Inter-Commission Working Groups*

* Inter-Commission Working Group on ethics and rules of procedure
* Inter-Commission Working Group for organization of expert services
* Inter-Commission Working Group on industry modernization issues
* Inter-Commission Working Group on children’s issues and youth policy
* Inter-Commission Working Group on drafting the annual report of the Civic Chamber on the state of the civil society in Russia

### *Research Institutes*

* Institute of Sustainable Development
* Institute for Promotion of Innovations
* Institute for Monitoring of Efficiency and Law Enforcement

In addition the members of the Civic Chamber may set up Ad Hoc Working Groups to conduct expertise of socially important bills underway in the Russian Parliament inviting representatives of the civil society organizations, government officials to join the Working Groups as experts.

## Board

Board of the Civic Chamber is the main governing body that guidelines, regulates and coordinates all the activities of the CCRF. It is composed of the President of the Civic Chamber, Vice-Presidents, Chairmen of the Commissions and Inter-Commission Working Groups and Heads of the Research Institutes.

### Activities

#### Plenary sessions

All the 126 members of the Civic Chamber participate in plenary sessions. Plenary sessions are conducted to deal with the most significant issues of Russia’s national development and civil society participation in it. 4-5 of such plenary sessions are held annually.

The first plenary session of a new convocation of the CCRF elects the President of the Civic Chamber and Vice-Presidents, establishes Commissions and Inter-Commission Working Groups. During the annual December sessions the Annual Report of the Civic Chamber on the State of Civil Society in the Russian Federation is discussed and approved. The report is then presented to the Head of State and may be further disseminated.

#### Public hearings

The CCRF has held dozens of public hearings involving broad segments of society on various pressing issues of national development and international relations.

#### Conferences, Roundtables and Seminars on topical social issues

The Chamber has organized hundreds of conferences, roundtables and seminars in Russia and abroad on different aspects of civil society participation in the solving of the social and economic problems and in the modernization of Russia.

#### Public expertise of bills and other legislation

According to the current legislation, the Civic Chamber may carry out expertise of bills underway in the State Duma, lower house of the Russian parliament. Total of 65 draft Federal Laws were viewed and examined by the CCRF in 2011. For example, on October 20, 2011 the CCRF submitted to the Duma the its expert assessment of the key national bill “On the federal budget for 2012 and for the period of 2013-2014”.

#### Public control and support to civil society initiatives

The Civic Chamber exerts public control over socially important projects (fight against illegal gambling businesses, combat against speculative attacks on vital food items, mobilization of broader civil society groups and fund-raising for the victims of Russian wildfires in 2010 among others).

The CCRF also supports important civil society initiatives and actions, such as the projects “It’s time to pay the debts” aimed at helping elderly people that need cardiologic operations or “A country without foolishness” to fight against law violations and excessive administrative regulation.

#### Cooperation with NPOs/NGOs

The Civic Chamber has promoted the development of non-commercial sector in Russia. The coherent efforts by the CCRF helped to adopt a milder version of the Federal Law on NPOs/NGOs in 2005. The Chamber has voiced in favour of the granting of the regular financial support by the government to national NPOs/NGOs.

#### Support to the establishment of regional civic chambers and civic observer councils under federal ministries and agencies

Creation of civic chambers in constituent entities of the Russian Federation and establishment of civic observer councils under federal ministries and agencies is one of the most important trends of the current Russian civil society’s development.

The Civic Chamber is an absolute leader in the setting up of such bodies. The CCRF renders technical, legal and expert assistance to these emerging institutes of civil society. As a result of this work, 64 of 83 Russian regions have today their own civic chambers.

The CCRF both supports the creation of civic observer councils under federal ministries and takes part in their activities. Members of the Civic Chamber have entered 48 civic observer councils under federal ministries and agencies.

#### Election monitoring

One of important tasks of the Civic Chamber consists in exerting public control during the period of elections. The observer activities and missions of the Civic Chamber at the parliamentary elections in 2007 and in 2011 may be viewed as instrumental in this regard.

Since 2006 the Civic Chamber of the Russian Federation has sponsored the national network of public centers of election monitoring “Press and election”. The network laid the grounds for public control and free media coverage of the parliamentary elections in Russia in 2007. Later on, the CCRF members backed the establishment of the Association of NPOs/NGOs for Protection of Civil Voting Rights “Civil Control”. With the assistance of the CCRF there was created a “hot line” for voters in 45 regions of Russia. The Civic Chamber also launched the Coordinative Council of NPOs/NGOs which prepared observers for the mentioned elections and observed the election process and voting procedures.

#### Our achievements

Created in 2005, the Civic Chamber has become in 6 years of existence a key civil society organization in Russia, an important channel of dialogue between the society and the government, a platform for broader social participation.

Firstly, the interference of the Civic Chamber has made Russian authorities change a strategic oil pipeline route in the region of Lake Baikal, national landmark and heritage, to meet strict environmental demands.

Secondly, the Civic Chamber has contributed to the adoption of the decision by the authorities to limit the scale of the illegal gambling business and money laundering in Russia.

Thirdly, the CCRF has advocated for the adoption of the Federal Law №76 “On public control over human rights in prisons and on assistance to persons in prisons”, demanding wider rights for NGOs to access prisons and observe the situation in prisons, treatment of prisoners and enforcement of their rights.

Fourthly, since 2005 the Civic Chamber has provided expertise of 150 federal bills contributing to their improvement in the interests of citizens, customers and civil society organizations.

Fifthly, the Chamber has established regular meetings with the President of Russia to directly voice and convey concerns from the people and civil society. As a result of the latest meeting with the President Dmitry Medvedev on January 20, 2011 the Civic Chamber has launched the elaboration of a fundamental Federal Law “On public control” and the preparation of a national report on the efficiency of current anti-corruption policies in Russia.

## International activities

The Civic Chamber of the Russian Federation participates in various international exchanges, interacts with international organizations, economic and social councils and similar institutions of other countries. The scale of its international activities is constantly growing. While in 2006-2008 the CCRF carried out about 50 international events, the number of international events organized by the Civic Chamber constantly grew in 2009-2010 and reached 112 in 2011.

Developing international cooperation with the International association of economic and social councils and similar institutions (AICESIS) is one of the top priorities of the CCRF. The Civic Chamber entered the AICESIS in 2006 contributing regularly to the activities of this Association. In 2009 the CCRF hosted the AICESIS Board Meeting in Moscow and joined the Board in 2011 at the General Assembly in Rome (July 21-23, 2011).

The Civic Chamber has developed close ties with international organizations, first of all, with the UN and its specialized bodies (UNESCO, UNICEF etc.). The main objective of this interaction is to consolidate efforts of the civil society institutions of Russia and abroad in the promotion of intercultural dialogue and in the eradication of racial, ethnical and religious discrimination. In the light of the upcoming UN Conference “Rio+20” the Civic Chamber has coordinated the civil society efforts in shaping of the national strategy on sustainable development.

The CCRF has maintained frequent exchanges with its partners in the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). In 2011 the CCRF, the Public Council of Armenia and the Ukrainian National Tripartite Social and Economic Council signed an Agreement on elaboration of a consolidated position of the three institutions within the AICESIS activities.

The Civic Chamber and its key partner in Europe – the European Economic and Social Committee – have established practice of holding annual seminars on Russia-EU cooperation. The Chamber has nourished cooperation with other economic and social councils within the EU, especially with Greece, France, Italy and Spain, and has developed mature relationship with other key European structures, such as the OSCE, the Council of Europe and others. In 2010 the Council of Europe recognized the Civic Chamber as the most representative institution in the Russian Federation.

The Civic Chamber has fostered ties with emerging leaders such as China, Brazil and South Africa and has established cooperation between the economic and social councils and similar institutions of the BRICS countries. On October 13, 2011 the CCRF held the first roundtable in the BRICS format in Moscow that resulted in the signing of the respective Agreement on cooperation.

The Civic Chamber is interested in forging new partnerships with other countries and regions through public diplomacy efforts in order to build a more democratic, prosperous, comfort and stable Russia with strong civil society voice.