



CIVIL SOCIETY AND THE SOCIAL SCIENCES: EXAMINING POWER RELATIONS IN MODERN RUSSIA

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the intricate relationship between civil society and the social sciences in the context of modern Russia, where increasing authoritarianism has reshaped the boundaries of public discourse, academic inquiry, and civic engagement. Drawing on interdisciplinary approaches and qualitative analysis, the study explores how both civil society actors and social scientists navigate state-imposed restrictions while maintaining critical roles in resisting dominant power structures. The findings reveal that Russian civil society, although heavily constrained by legal and institutional pressures—such as the “foreign agent” and “undesirable organizations” laws—continues to adapt through decentralized, grassroots strategies, digital platforms, and symbolic resistance. In parallel, the social sciences face growing political interference, with state efforts to instrumentalize academic research and suppress critical perspectives. Nevertheless, many scholars pursue intellectual resistance through independent networks, international collaboration, and nuanced critique. The interplay between these two domains demonstrates a dual dynamic of collaboration and shared vulnerability. Civil society relies on scholarly knowledge to legitimize its claims and strategies, while the social sciences benefit from civic actors' empirical insights and lived experiences. Despite repression, this mutual relationship fosters innovation, resilience, and the continued production of critical knowledge in an increasingly hostile environment. This paper concludes that the relationship between civil society and the social sciences in Russia not only reflects broader struggles over power and autonomy, but also illuminates the enduring potential for democratic agency, even under authoritarian rule. Understanding this interplay is crucial for comprehending the sociopolitical dynamics of resistance and intellectual freedom in contemporary Russia.

INTRODUCTION

Civil society is a vital element in modern socio-political life, playing a crucial role in bridging the interests of citizens and the state. Globally, civil society is often regarded as an indicator of a country's level of democratization and as a space where critical discourse and public participation can flourish. However, the role and position of civil society are deeply influenced by political power structures, state policies, and

prevailing social and cultural conditions. Russia, with its long history of authoritarianism, ideological transformation, and tension between state authority and individual freedoms, provides a complex and compelling context for examining the dynamics between civil society and the social sciences—as both analytical tools and actors within power relations (Beyer, 2013).

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, Russia has undergone multiple phases



of political, social, and economic transition. These changes have significantly affected the landscape of civil society. In the early stages of transition, there was hope for the development of a more open and inclusive public sphere. However, over the past two decades, there has been a marked consolidation of state power under the leadership of Vladimir Putin, which has had a profound impact on the activities of civil society organizations, particularly those seen as opposing official state narratives or receiving support from foreign entities. In this context, the concept of civil society in Russia has not only become a contested discursive space but also a target of strict regulation, legal restrictions, and intense political scrutiny (Crotty, 2014).

The social sciences play a strategic role in analyzing and interpreting these power configurations. On one hand, Russia has a strong intellectual tradition in the social sciences, rooted in both Marxist thought and post-Soviet theoretical development. On the other hand, social scientists often find themselves in a dilemma between academic idealism and political realities. Research institutions, universities, and non-governmental organizations focusing on social studies and human rights are frequently viewed by the state as threats, and are therefore subject to limitations on academic freedom and structural repression.

The relationship between civil society and the social sciences in modern Russia reflects the tension between knowledge and power. As Michel Foucault suggested, knowledge is never neutral—it is embedded in power relations that shape and are shaped by it. In this sense, the social sciences are not merely tools for understanding society, but are also directly involved in the production

and reproduction of power structures. It is therefore important to examine how social scientists in Russia position themselves within existing power structures, the extent to which they can maintain intellectual independence, and how their work contributes to either strengthening or weakening civil society (Sundstrom, 2006).

This paper seeks to explore the dialectical relationship between civil society and the social sciences in contemporary Russia. Through an interdisciplinary approach, this study will investigate how power regimes affect the space available to civil society, how the social sciences respond to these conditions, and how the interaction between the two reflects broader dynamics of democracy and state control in Russia. Understanding this topic is not only important for the theoretical development of the social sciences but is also highly relevant in the global context of democratic backsliding and the rise of authoritarianism in many parts of the world.

METHODS

1. Research Approach

This study employs a qualitative approach with a library research design and exploratory case study framework. This approach was chosen because the research aims to deeply understand a complex socio-political phenomenon—namely, the relationship between civil society and the social sciences within the power structure of modern Russia. A qualitative approach allows for an in-depth exploration of meanings, perspectives, and social-political dynamics that cannot be captured through quantitative methods.

2. Types and Sources of Data



The study relies on secondary data obtained from various credible documents and sources, including:

- Academic journal articles (both international and national).
- Books on social theory, political science, and Russian history.
- Reports from international non-governmental organizations (e.g., Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International)
- Official documents and legal regulations issued by the Russian government concerning civil society and academic institutions
- Secondary interviews and reports from reputable media outlets (such as BBC, The Moscow Times, etc.)

3. Data Collection Techniques

Data were collected using the following techniques:

- Document analysis, which involves the systematic examination of written and digital documents relevant to the research topic.
- Literature review, conducted to trace various theoretical perspectives and previous findings related to civil society, social sciences, and power dynamics in Russia.

4. Data Analysis Techniques

The data were analyzed using content analysis and critical discourse analysis:

- Content Analysis was used to identify patterns, themes, and meanings within relevant documents and literature.
- Critical Discourse Analysis (drawing from the works of Norman Fairclough and Michel Foucault) was employed to examine how power relations are constructed, maintained, or challenged

through the discourse of the state, civil society, and the academic community.

The analysis followed an inductive reasoning model, focusing on the interpretation of Russia's socio-political context while considering the historical relationship between knowledge and power.

5. Research Limitations

This study has several limitations:

- The geographic focus is limited to the Russian Federation in the post-Soviet era (1991–present), particularly since the consolidation of state power after 2000.
- It does not include primary field research or interviews due to access restrictions and political risks.
- The research results are descriptive-analytical and not intended for quantitative generalization.

6. Data Validity

To ensure data validity and reliability of interpretations, the study applied:

- Source triangulation, by comparing data from multiple sources (academic, governmental, media, and NGO reports).
- Peer debriefing, by discussing initial findings with fellow researchers or academics to gain additional insights and reduce interpretive bias.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

This study delves into the intricate relationship between civil society and the social sciences in contemporary Russia, highlighting how these entities navigate and influence the prevailing power structures. The findings reveal a complex interplay where civil society, despite facing significant state repression, continues to assert its presence, often through subtle and indirect means.



Concurrently, the social sciences in Russia grapple with the challenges of maintaining academic independence and relevance within an increasingly authoritarian regime (Evans, Henry, & Sundstrom, 2006).

Civil Society in Contemporary Russia: Dynamics, Repression, and Strategies of Resilience

In modern Russia, civil society operates within a highly complex and repressive environment. After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, there was hope for the emergence of a vibrant and empowered civil society alongside the transition to democracy and a market economy. However, the process has been unstable, and over the past two decades, civil society has experienced a significant decline as a result of increasingly authoritarian state policies.

1. Legal Restrictions and State Repression

Under the leadership of Vladimir Putin, the Russian government has enacted a series of laws aimed at curbing the influence and independence of civil society organizations. Some of the most notable include:

- The “foreign agent” law, which requires organizations receiving foreign funding and engaging in so-called “political activity” to register as “foreign agents.” This label carries a strong negative connotation and often discredits organizations in the eyes of the public.
- The “undesirable organizations” law, which allows the state to ban international organizations deemed a threat to national security.
- Restrictions on freedom of assembly and expression, including the use of police force to disperse peaceful protests.

These laws systematically weaken the operational capacity of independent civil society groups. Many NGOs have been forcibly shut down, activists arrested, and some have been exiled or even assassinated.

2. State Strategy: From Suppression to Co-optation

The Russian government not only targets critical civil society actors but also develops and promotes Government-Organized Non-Governmental Organizations (GONGOs). These state-sponsored entities are designed to mimic independent civil society groups but function entirely under Kremlin control.

GONGOs are often given visibility in the media and international forums, presenting a façade of civic engagement while marginalizing genuine opposition voices. This strategy has proven effective in confusing the public and diluting the impact of independent civic activism (Howard, 2003).

3. Soft Resistance and Creative Adaptation

Despite immense pressure, civil society in Russia has not vanished. In fact, it has evolved into a more subtle, adaptive, and creative force of resistance. Examples include:

- Grassroots movements focusing on environmental issues, local cultural preservation, and minority rights.
- Digital activism, with the use of social media to spread awareness and organize actions.
- Informal educational initiatives, such as intellectual discussion groups, book clubs, and workshops that promote critical thinking and democratic values.



- Symbolic protest, such as one-person pickets—which remain legal under Russian law but still send a powerful political message.

These actions show that civil society actors are not passive victims of repression, but instead are actively reshaping their strategies to survive and influence change in a restricted political environment (Gel'man, 2015).

4. The Role of Youth and Technology

Young Russians play a vital role in sustaining civil society. More digitally connected and globally aware, they utilize encrypted apps, VPNs, and international platforms like Telegram and YouTube to organize, share information, and express dissent.

However, the state is increasingly extending its control over digital space as well. Websites are blocked, online activity is monitored, and vague definitions of "extremist information" are used to criminalize dissent on the internet.

The Role of the Social Sciences in Contemporary Russia: Between Knowledge Production and Political Constraint

In the landscape of contemporary Russia, the social sciences occupy a paradoxical and contested space. On one hand, they serve as essential tools for analyzing social dynamics, interpreting political behavior, and promoting critical thinking. On the other, they function within a highly controlled intellectual and political environment, where academic freedom is frequently constrained by state agendas and ideological pressures (Ishiyama, 2014). This tension reflects the broader struggle between knowledge and power, particularly in authoritarian or semi-authoritarian regimes.

1. Historical Legacy and Intellectual Foundations

The social sciences in Russia are shaped by a rich but complex intellectual legacy. During the Soviet period, disciplines such as sociology, political science, and anthropology were either tightly controlled or entirely suppressed, subordinated to Marxist-Leninist ideology. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, these fields experienced a brief renaissance in the 1990s, as Russian scholars engaged more freely with Western theories and methodologies. Institutions were restructured, international collaborations increased, and new research centers were established (Hemment, 2012).

However, this intellectual openness began to decline in the 2000s, as the Russian government gradually reasserted control over educational and research institutions. While the infrastructure of academic research remains intact, the autonomy of researchers has become increasingly limited.

2. State Control and Ideological Re-alignment

The Russian state employs both direct and indirect methods to control the production of social knowledge:

- Through funding mechanisms, where grants and institutional support are tied to ideologically acceptable research agendas.
- Via institutional restructuring, such as the merger of independent research centers into state-run institutions.
- Through legal restrictions, including laws on "extremism" and "foreign agents" that target



researchers and academic NGOs receiving foreign funding.

Moreover, there is a growing emphasis on "traditional values" and "sovereign knowledge" in state discourse, which seeks to delegitimize Western social theories as culturally alien or politically subversive. This environment discourages critical scholarship, especially on sensitive topics such as human rights, political opposition, gender issues, or ethnic minorities (Petrov, Lipman, & Hale, 2014).

3. Academic Resistance and Intellectual Agency

Despite the constraints, many Russian social scientists continue to engage in critical inquiry and intellectual resistance, albeit in nuanced and often indirect ways:

- Some scholars adopt comparative or historical frameworks that allow for subtle critique without directly confronting state policy.
- Others collaborate with international networks to publish research abroad, where academic freedom is more robust.
- Informal academic spaces, such as independent discussion groups, online platforms, and underground journals, have emerged as alternative venues for knowledge exchange and dissent.

These efforts reflect a resilient intellectual agency within Russian academia—where scholars seek to uphold the integrity of their disciplines while navigating an increasingly hostile political climate.

4. The Instrumentalization of Social Science

In addition to suppressing critical research, the Russian government also seeks to instrumentalize the social

sciences for its own purposes. This includes:

- Promoting research that supports nationalistic and conservative narratives.
- Using data analysis and polling to shape public opinion and electoral strategy.
- Supporting think tanks and academic institutions that produce state-aligned policy recommendations.

This process creates a dual system of knowledge: one that is aligned with state interests and receives institutional support, and another that operates at the margins, often under the radar, committed to academic integrity and critical analysis.

Interplay Between Civil Society and the Social Sciences in Contemporary Russia

The relationship between civil society and the social sciences in Russia is both dynamic and fraught with tension. These two domains, while distinct in their functions, often intersect in meaningful ways (Salmenniemi, 2008). Civil society actors rely on the social sciences to interpret, validate, and disseminate knowledge that supports democratic engagement, social justice, and civic participation. Conversely, social scientists depend on civil society as a source of empirical data, field insight, and as a real-world arena where theoretical frameworks are tested and applied.

In authoritarian or semi-authoritarian contexts like contemporary Russia, this interplay becomes particularly complex, shaped by mutual constraints, shared goals, and common strategies of adaptation and resistance (Laruelle, 2020).

1. Mutual Dependency in Knowledge and Practice



Civil society organizations—particularly those working in areas such as human rights, environmental protection, gender equality, and minority advocacy—often partner with social scientists to generate credible data and analysis. This collaboration not only strengthens advocacy but also provides academics with grounded, community-based research material.

For example:

- NGOs may invite sociologists or political scientists to evaluate social programs or assess policy impacts.
- Researchers may use civil society networks to access hard-to-reach populations or document state abuses.

This symbiotic relationship enhances both practical activism and academic relevance.

2. Shared Space in Challenging Power

Both civil society and the social sciences frequently serve as counterweights to state narratives. They expose social inequalities, question official policies, and offer alternative perspectives on national identity, governance, and human development. This makes them targets of state control.

In Russia, scholars and activists alike have been accused of promoting “foreign influence” or undermining “traditional values.” Many have been labeled as “foreign agents,” particularly when their work critiques state policy or receives international funding. As a result, both communities must constantly adapt to avoid surveillance, legal sanctions, or public delegitimization.

This has led to a shift in how knowledge is shared and mobilized:

- Research findings are often disseminated through informal or semi-private channels, such as encrypted networks or closed academic forums.
- Public intellectuals—individuals bridging academic and civic worlds—play a vital role in translating complex theories into actionable public discourse, often at great personal risk.

3. Constraints and Fragmentation

While interdependence exists, the relationship is also marked by fragmentation. Not all scholars or institutions are willing to align themselves with civic causes, especially given the risks involved. Some universities and research centers have been co-opted by the state, becoming reluctant or unable to support critical social research.

Similarly, some segments of civil society, particularly those focused on service delivery or cultural work, may distance themselves from politically sensitive topics in order to survive.

This fragmentation weakens the potential for collective resistance and limits the scale of coordinated action between scholars and activists.

4. Innovation and Resilience Through Collaboration

Despite the challenges, the interplay between civil society and the social sciences in Russia has fostered significant innovation:

- Hybrid spaces have emerged where academic discourse and civic action converge (e.g., independent media platforms, informal public lectures, underground journals).



- Interdisciplinary research driven by real-world problems has gained traction, particularly in areas like urban studies, public health, and digital activism.
- Youth-led movements and student-led research projects are increasingly blurring the boundaries between academic inquiry and political engagement.
- These examples suggest that even under restrictive conditions, collaboration between civil society and academia can generate critical insight and foster civic awareness.

CONCLUSIONS

This study has explored the complex and often precarious relationship between civil society and the social sciences in contemporary Russia. Set against the backdrop of an increasingly centralized and authoritarian state, both sectors face significant constraints—legal, ideological, and institutional. Despite these challenges, they continue to play vital roles in contesting dominant power structures, producing critical knowledge, and fostering civic engagement. Civil society in Russia, though heavily repressed, has demonstrated remarkable adaptability. Through grassroots activism, symbolic protest, and digital innovation, it continues to assert its presence in the public sphere. Meanwhile, the social sciences—though often operating under state-imposed limitations—remain a critical site for the interrogation of power, identity, and state-society relations. Scholars use subtle methods, alternative platforms, and international networks to maintain intellectual autonomy and resist epistemic closure.

The interplay between these two domains is characterized by mutual support as well as

shared vulnerability. Civil society actors depend on academic research to legitimize their advocacy and policy critiques, while social scientists often draw on the lived experiences and empirical data provided by civic organizations. Yet, both are subject to state surveillance, censorship, and attempts at co-optation, leading to fragmentation and self-censorship in some quarters. Ultimately, this relationship reveals the enduring tension between knowledge and power in authoritarian regimes. It also underscores the potential for resistance, collaboration, and resilience in constrained environments. As long as spaces for independent thought and civic action remain—even if limited—there is room for transformation. Understanding how these spaces are negotiated, preserved, and sometimes expanded provides valuable insight into the possibilities of democratic agency under authoritarian rule.

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