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Civil Society Unites Behind Kudrin

By Vladimir Ryzhkov

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Former Deputy Prime Minister and Finance Minister Alexei Kudrin recently hosted the All-Russian Civil Forum, with about 1,000 people representing all 83 of Russia's regions and hundreds of diverse nongovernmental organizations attending. The forum's organizing committee decided not to invite President Vladimir Putin, government officials or politicians in general. They held the forum at the pricey World Trade Center in Moscow and made use of the most modern technologies and the newest methods for moderating large gatherings.

Previous forums enjoyed support from opposition leader Garry Kasparov and former Prime Minister Mikhail Kasyanov, and the 2001 Forum was even held in the Kremlin. President Vladimir Putin spoke at that event and Moscow Helsinki Group director Lyudmila Alekseyeva then, as happened this year, sat in the presidium. However, that old romance between the authorities and civil society soon grew cold, and every forum since has carried a distinct opposition tone.

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expand his image by serving as a leader for those who advocate civil society, including the opposition.

Kudrin brought together all of the most important organizations of civil society, the most well-known and respected NGOs — from the Golos election monitoring association and the remnants of former Yukos CEO Mikhail Khodorkovsky's Open Russia, to Transparency International and the World Wildlife Fund. The membership of the form's organizing committee included Alekseyeva, philanthropist and doctor Yelizaveta Glinka, economist Yevgeny Gontmakher, Transparency International's Yelena Panfilova, publisher and literary critic Irina Prokhorova, Pavel Chikov of the human rights group Agora, and other key figures from Russia's independent NGOs.

The forum included five main sessions, with Georgy Satarov moderating the plenary session's discussion on "The Authorities," former Institute of Contemporary Development head Igor Yurgens moderating "The Economy," Gontmakher moderating "Life in Russia," and Panfilova moderating "Society." The goal of that collective effort: to develop an "Agenda for Russia." Over the course of the day, the dozens of working groups of forum participants managed to formulate the Russian third sector's view on the country's existing problems and their proposals for resolving them.

During the final evening session, the four moderators summed up the results of the discussions. The day of collective brainstorming produced numerous novel ideas for solving the country's problems. Those will be publishing by the Forum Organizing Committee and the Civil Initiatives Committee headed by Kudrin.

On the whole, the forum participants' diagnoses of society's ills and their proposals for rectifying them fall within a social framework emphasizing liberal values, the rule of law, a social market economy, the precedence of the individual and society over the state, institutional reforms and the protection of human rights. Participants also devoted significant time to discussing the law requiring NGOs that receive even partial funding from abroad to label themselves as "foreign agents," and gave a standing ovation to the suggestion that the forum appeal to Putin and the State Duma to repeal it.

In discussing democracy and political competition, participants concluded that the perpetuation of the monopoly on power and the practice of electoral fraud — along with the endemic corruption resulting from it — continue because of five barriers. They include: the lack of an honest arbitrator for elections, meaning honest courts and independent elections commissions; poor electoral law; monetary shortfalls in municipal and regional budgets; an ideologically and organizationally weak opposition; and the absence of independent mass media. As long as those barriers remain in place, democracy and political competition in Russia are impossible.

Change must start with solutions to two major problems. First, Russia must create an

independent arbitrator for elections. This requires reforms to the courts, eliminating the practice of electing the head of elections commissions by lot and prohibiting the authorities from participating in selecting the commissions' members. Second, the federal authorities must decentralize authority and allocate a greater share of the government's income to regional and municipal centers.

According to organizers, the vision developed at the Civil Forum represents the consolidated position of Russia's leading NGOs, and the fact that all of the main players in civil society contributed lends greater social and political weight to the result. Forum organizers and Kudrin will formally present those conclusions and proposals to Putin with the expectation that they will lead to changes in official policy.

For Kudrin, the forum served as an important step toward creating a new image and a new position for himself in the country's politics. He resigned from his government post two years ago over fundamental differences with Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev regarding fiscal and economic policy, and to this day many perceive him as a former minister and economist, or even more narrowly, a finance expert.

Kudrin never joined the opposition and maintains good personal relations with Putin. He did not found a new political party, as did billionaire Mikhail Prokhorov, although Kudrin does conduct a number of major public projects in cooperation with Prokhorov. At the same time, Kudrin is attempting to expand his image by serving as a leader for those who advocate the ideas of Russian civil society, including the opposition. With the conclusion of this year's Civil Forum, Kudrin has shown himself to be not only an economist, but a major public figure who has managed to unite Russia's NGOs in all of their great diversity while also pushing for liberal and social reforms.

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