



**YELTSIN  
CENTER**

## 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 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, however, with implications for support for civil society institutions.

There is an urgent need to rebuild bridges and to reestablish a serious dialogue about the role of Russian civil society and relations between diverse civic actors domestically, as well as between Russian organizations and international partners.

In cooperation with, and with the generous support of, the Yeltsin Presidential Center and Yeltsin Foundation, 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 established civil society, informal actors, donors, the media, and other groups, and will focus on questions of governance, transparency, domestic and international support, justice, and structural and regulatory challenges.

## **The Symposium**

The Russian Civil Society Symposium will examine recent developments in civil society in the Russian Federation to examine priorities, issues, current challenges and opportunities. Short position papers will be commissioned in advance and will form the basis of 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, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), donors, 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 respected practitioners, thinkers and leaders from diverse sectors and institutions. Participants will include NGO leaders, legal and policy experts, social and financial entrepreneurs, educators and bodies representing youth and diverse minorities. Participants will also be invited from specific regions and nations experiencing related 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 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 identify 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 donors, policy-makers, activists and educational institutions can do to nourish strong civic 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 important societal needs (for example, in education, culture, youth development, social justice, and environmental concerns);
- Stimulate fresh thinking on roles for various key actors to help forge and sustain 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 most effective role of domestic and international donors in supporting civil society?
- How do legal frameworks underpin or constrain civil society? How can a more enabling environment be created?
- 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?
- How can stronger structural support for the sector be developed? What role does transparency play and how can it be strengthened, without putting civic actors at risk?
- What new tools are emerging that strengthen civil society and how can they be applied more effectively?

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.

During the Symposium, the Salzburg Global Seminar will, subject to the use of the Chatham House Rule, produce daily session summaries, in-depth interviews, 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 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](http://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.