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The CIVITAS Model for the Participation of Community Organizations in Russian Urban Environments

James E. Hickey, Jr.

Introduction

For the first time in history, over one half of the world's population now lives in cities. In the post-cold war era, with increasing global economic integration and growing international trade based on market principles, the movement toward urbanization is likely to continue well into the twenty-first century. One of the pressing questions facing urban governments is how to simultaneously accommodate urbanization, economic vitality, and quality of life.¹ That accommodation requires, among other things, legal, political, and policy processes in which competing interests with a stake in urban environment issues can participate in a meaningful way.

The participation process in urban environment decision-making can be formal or informal. Formal decision-making usually operates in established fora under some enabling law or regulation supervised by government officials. Licensing and zoning proceedings are typical formal decision-making processes. Informal decision-making may occur independently or as part of formal decision-making. Informal decision-making processes include meetings, conversations and exchanges of information among interested parties. Whether formal or informal, the decision-making process should assure an opportunity for participation by public interests such as local, regional and national governments and by private interests such as businesses, consumers, and citizens living in neighborhood urban communities.

If neighborhood community interests are not meaningfully taken into account in the urban environment equation, the quality of life for residents

may well deteriorate. In any event, the responsibility for the quality of life in urban communities does not rest with government alone. Urban communities and neighborhoods must shoulder some of the responsibility themselves. The question for urban communities is how best to carry out that responsibility. This question is especially complex now for Russian urban communities as the country moves toward democracy and a market economy.

This essay introduces the CIVITAS model for community-based participation in urban environment decision-making. It suggests that the CIVITAS experience might serve as an adaptable model for the expression and advocacy of neighborhood quality of life issues in Russian urban communities.

The CIVITAS Model

CIVITAS is a union of citizens who live in East Harlem and the Upper East Side of the Borough of Manhattan in New York City.² It was founded almost two decades ago as a voluntary community organization to work for improvement to the quality of urban life in East Harlem and the Upper East Side.

CIVITAS may serve as a model for Russian urban communities if for no other reason than it has been successful. CIVITAS has survived and flourished as an urban community-based organization, and it is likely to continue to operate successfully well into the 21st Century. During the years of its existence it has had a substantial and significant impact on the quality of life of citizens in East Harlem and the Upper East Side.

CIVITAS has over 2000 members. It functions through a board of directors, organization officers

¹ The terms "environment" and "quality of life" refer here broadly to social and cultural values as well as to the physical and biological status of geographic areas.

² The word CIVITAS comes from Latin and refers to "the rights of a citizen" and appropriately to "a union of citizens." D.P. Simpson *Cassel's New Latin Dictionary* (1968).

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(President, Vice-President, Treasurer and Secretary) and an advisory board. The boards and officers are part-time volunteers and are not paid for their service. CIVITAS is funded by voluntary contributions received from individuals, private foundations, commercial banks, and the New York State Office of Parks.

An initial problem which urban neighborhoods must address in forming a community-based organization is the scope of activities to be addressed. Urban neighborhoods everywhere face a daunting array of issues that might affect their environment and quality of life.

Voluntary, non-profit, urban neighborhood organizations, such as CIVITAS, cannot address effectively all subjects and issues facing urban communities. Most successful urban community-based organizations channel their efforts and concentrate on one, or perhaps two, subjects or issues. The primary focus of CIVITAS is to seek urban planning and zoning that maintains affordable housing and the integrity of the neighborhood character on the Upper East Side and East Harlem.³ Activities within that focus which CIVITAS has undertaken have included the following:

- better housing for low and moderate-income families and the elderly.
- good public transportation links.
- neighborhood-sensitive new construction
- improved community facilities.
- rehabilitation of existing buildings and historic preservation.
- clean affordable municipal water.
- lively commercial streets.
- more trees and sunlight and airy open spaces.
- good recreational areas.
- safety and security.

Over the years CIVITAS has worked formally and informally with municipal government, politicians, other neighborhood groups and associations, and consultants to produce information and recommendations that affect urban planning and zoning matters in the community. The primary vehicles used by CIVITAS to address these matters are surveys, reports, and studies. Specific studies and reports

prepared by CIVITAS within its "primary focus" include the following:

- A planning study on zoning, open space, transportation and street scape that resulted in government-ordered changes in the community including the removal of 12 stories from the top of a completed building.
- An in-depth survey of neighborhood commercial properties and residences that have led to round-table discussions with property owners about unoccupied properties and lack of renovation.
- A report that connected the economic health of neighborhood businesses to residential noncommercial development.

One lesson of CIVITAS' activities is that an urban neighborhood organization, to be effective, should focus narrowly on a particular subject matter for its work. This helps the organization avoid dissipating scarce financial and human resources. It also enables the organization to develop an expertise and a reputation in the larger community for that expertise. In turn, this helps the organization to raise money and to have its work taken seriously.

Conclusion

As Russia proceeds through the twin processes of democratization and conversion to a market economy, it is important to assure that "...persons living in urban neighborhoods... participate actively in the basic societal decisions that structure their lives."⁴ That assurance is unlikely to be guaranteed or safeguarded by government without the active participation of urban neighborhoods in the formal and informal decision making processes. One of the more important problems in Russian cities is the creation of opportunity for development of small businesses in areas with empty office space and closed shops. Russian people have no experience with developing such projects in the framework of a free-market economy and they have no good examples of community organization activity.

Distributing information about CIVITAS activity,

³ See "The ABC of Zoning: CIVITAS' Upper East Side/East Harlem Guide."

⁴ Gerald E. Frug, "The City as a Legal Concept," 93 Harv. L. Rev. 1059 (1980)

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such as a plan for East Harlem, might give Russian community organizations a chance to understand how much could and must be done by themselves. One vehicle for the active participation of urban communities in the quality of life of their neighborhood is for citizens in specific urban neighborhoods to form and support non-profit, volunteer, organizations like CIVITAS. The CIVITAS model used in New York City provides an effective way for urban residents to actively participate in the economic development and in the improvement quality of life in their neighborhood. CIVITAS' example has helped to foster reliance on the democratic process, to increase confidence in market transactions, and to produce a more responsive municipal government in urban planning and zoning matters in Russia.

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