The state of grass-roots voluntary activities in post-communist Russia and other former socialist states is of great interest for the research of the civil society from historical and comparative international perspectives. It is important to investigate the existing and developing theories and methodology for their accuracy and relevancy in analyses of voluntary civic activities and their organizational forms. In case of post-communist countries, the ethnocentric approach in assessments of voluntary sector has been complemented by ideological biases among some researchers. This leads to insufficient argumentation and even logic fallacies in analyses.

The purpose of the paper is to deconstruct the argumentation based on the prevailing Western framework in the assessing of voluntary activities in Russian society.

Two main theoretical questions are relevant to this discussion: (i) the institutional structure of the civil society (e.g. Putnam, Leonardi, & Nanetti, 1993; Scorpol, 2004; Evans, Henry, & Sundstrom, 2006; Aronoff & Kubik, 2012;), (ii) the impact of legacies on current developments (e.g., Jowitt, 1992; La Porte & Lussier, 2011; Wittenberg, 2012). For critical review of prominent theoretical frameworks and concepts in this area, I concentrate on analyses of Marc Howard's (2003, 2011) studies in regards to Russia of as an exemplar one in the field of comparative international research of the post-communist civil societies.

Howard used the level of membership in formal voluntary association as the indicator for assessing the vitality of the civil society. After applying this criterion to his research, Howard concluded that the Russian civil society is weak in the post-communist period. Howard assumed without presentation of evidences that there were no “real” voluntary associations or civic activism in socialist countries. He argued that “communist legacies” including a mistrust of any formal civic organizations are the main impediment to development of the civil society in post-communist settings. Howard suggested that only a generational shift and/or strong state support for the voluntary associations are needed before Russians will be capable to develop a vibrant liberal civil society.

I argue that Howard’s claims can be challenged within the concept of historical legacies and methodological accuracy. For instance, the mistrust of “communist” organizations as an explanation of current citizens’ behavior could be questioned at least for the following three reasons. First, the phenomenon of institutional mistrust was known in pre-communist era in the tsarist Russia. Second, the cause-effects relations between experience of communist organizations and current civic behavior could be considered as a correlation only. Finally, the current mistrust could be explained more convincingly by other conditions, such as, for example, a reaction to the hostile attitude of the political elite towards civic enthusiasm of population in 1986-1992 and the economic hardship of Russians
during the reform in the 1990s when people focused mostly on personal surviving strategies and no formal organization helped them in any way.

In sum, I argue that assessment of the vibrancy and perspectives of the civic society based only on the level of participation and membership in formal voluntary organizations has severe limitations. Country-specific context and collective experience – historical, cultural, economical, and political - should be considered when choosing criteria for evaluation. In regards to the development of research methodology, I suggest that more attention should be devoted to establishing cause-effect relations of legacies and past individual’s experiences to current attitudes and behaviors before far-reaching conclusion and generalizations can be made.

References