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Лео Гранберг,
Университет Хельсинки
Leo Granberg,
University of Helsinki

REFLECTIONS ON CIVIC ORGANISATIONS IN RUSSIA – CIVIL SOCIETY AND POVERTY

The paper presents preliminary results from a research with the focus on a group of civic organisations in a rather central Russian Region. All of them are trying to find solutions to problems of poverty or closely related issues, for instance drug use.

Civic organisations are here understood as one part of civil society. They are not a part of the state, the markets or the family. Civil society has several dimensions. Most concretely it is often organised into associations or clubs in informal voluntary organisations or also in varying forms of informal networks. Secondly, civil society is developing and existing in the 'public sphere' in various forms of communication which develop in spaces accessible for common people, in clubhouses and parks as well as in internet. This dimension may survive and develop even where a government tries to restrict all civic communication. And finally, civil society is connected to ethic values, such which aim to benefit society as large – which naturally do not always take place. Openly criminal activities or pursuit of limitedly own interest do not belong to the sphere of civil society. (Chebankova 2014)

Great variety of local organisations in Russia

We have collected data on local organisations during many years in different projects, and for this special project from such organisations, which are closely connected to solve poverty-related problems. Our data tells about a great variety of formally organised civic activity, including local funds and ideal organisations, old type organisations with Soviet heritage and new ones. A part of them works in keen contact with local administration, which is a rather natural thing in poverty related issues. (Sätre 2019, Ch. 6) A new local organisation type is worth mentioning, it is TOS (*Territorial'noe Obshchestvennoe Samoupravlenie*), which means directly translated 'self-managed local association'. TOS is a kind of minor form of a non-governmental organisation. It is short-term project organisation, which gets small

funding from a local/regional authority to work out some concrete task: to construct a playground for children, to make a local museum, organise cultural event etc.

Some examples of civic associations in our case study are following:

- A Foster Family Club, informal
- A Families' Crisis Centre
- A Charity Fund in a small town, which is registered as an NGO
- A Rehabilitation Centre for drug addicts
- A Women's Council
- An Association of Small NGOs, which is an informal body for cooperation and distributing information of single NGOs.

Relations of such civic organisation with local authorities are rather close. There are plusses and minuses, latter because bureaucracy takes time and control complicates activities of civil organisations, working on voluntary bases. However, authorities give also support for some organisations and open important doors for the volunteers in these organisations. There are signs of decreasing trust from the side of authorities to civic organisations and increasing control of them. The situation has been called a double reality, where volunteering activity is on one hand welcomed and supported and on the other hand increasingly controlled. At its worst this control may lead to the closing.

Adaptation to changing circumstances

The circumstances on the local level are changing in many ways, 'double reality' is just one aspect in it. Civic organisations need to adapt themselves to the changing circumstances. We made an effort to analyse the adaptation of this group of local, poverty-related civic organisations during 10 last years, 2006-2016 (with some variation). It came up that the organisations have made quite a few adaptations. Some of them have been merged together, some have sought tighter collaboration with registered organisations or enterprises, other ones have been merged to the local state organisations. Two basic ways of adaptation were to be reorganised or to keep organisation but change action plan.

Adaptation through organisational arrangements was completed in the Rehabilitation Centre. It had problems of increased control of sanitary norms: it was no more aloud to make food for homeless in the railway station as before. To overcome this difficulty the centre was merged to another NGO with dealing social problems on local level. The Foster Family Club needed access to grants and bank account. To reach this it started collaboration with a registered network of foster families, being thus able not to get registered and avoid bureaucracy, and still get the mentioned benefits. The Women Crises Centre had already earlier collaborated with a state organisation supplying social services. One day the Crises Centre was merged to it, personnel became state officers and the Centre became a part of budget organisation. This solution stabilised its financial situation, while it could continue to seek for additional funding for further development of services.

Adaptation of action plan could mean to try to enter to the list of 'social NGOs', in order to get opportunities to financial support and tax relief. Another practical adaptation is to avoid problems e.g. by being careful with foreign funding. Such funding is possible to be received without problems if the reason for it is not

political, but it is difficult to know where the line goes: what is 'non-political' and what is political. Also, some organisations changed partly their agenda, by including patriotism to the aims, e.g. a charity fund provided support for Patriotic Clubs to organise activities together with the monastery.

Considerations

Let us shortly compare Russian civic organisations to the western ones, in this case Nordic type of organisations (see Granberg 2018). One who knows both sides of the border, easily remarks that they have much in common even if differences exist. Solving local problems and gathering together like-minded people is for sure a most common feature for a lot of civic activity. However, in the Nordic countries a large part of associations represent the interests of their members and like to mediate them also in one way or another to the decision makers. In Russia this is done less and partly seen as a negative activity. In Russia civic organisations are more dependent on the leader's decisions and ability to continue activity, in Nordic countries annual meetings and larger boards are working together with the leaders and in critical situation the members are even able to change the leader. In Russia budget and bank account seem to be practical problems and registration of NGOs has complicated consequences for practical activities, while in Nordic countries they are rather easy tasks and the control of budget is taken first and foremost by the organisation members and the needs for official reporting is limited. In the Nordic countries it is more or less accepted that civic organisations have the right, in fact even responsibility to control the activities of authorities'.

To the end, I would like to argue that the basic reason for civic organisations is a structural cause, the **growing complexity of society**. Because of the complexity, various problems emerge between different parts in society (its subsystems) and inside of each part (its each subsystem). That means that we are not speaking about a Russian problem only, but a general problem for all industrialised societies, which emerges during industrialisation and modernisation processes. Still, there are features, which make Russia special, and they are connected to the Soviet past. Centrally led system – as it was in Soviet time - cannot regulate well enough the problems caused by systemic complexity. Civil society functions as a counterweight for centralisation and should be appreciated in this role. Civil society is needed to contribute society's development and solve problems, which spontaneous processes in society result in. If this is true, then the growing complexity in post-Soviet Russian society has created the need to give civil society greater role than it has today, and will do so in the visible future.

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