

## ARTICLES IN ENGLISH

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### THE ADAPTATION OF LOCAL CIVIC ORGANISATIONS IN RUSSIA TO CHANGE: A CASE STUDY OF NGOS WITH A FOCUS ON SOCIAL PROBLEMS

This article considers how Russian local civic organizations work and adapt to societal changes. We studied thirteen small NGOs in a region (*oblast*) of central Russia. These NGOs work with social issues, often connected to poverty and social marginalization. The NGOs are both formal and informal organizations, such as charity funds, registered associations, informal clubs, and local groups for mutual help and support. The NGOs have varying relations to the wider public, as well as to Russian authorities. Examining the local level means here urban or rural settlements and small towns. Social issues were a subject of concern for numerous local organizations. Their success in this activity was connected to trust in them among citizens. The overall picture is that a lot depended on the reputation of a leading person at the NGO. There were not many signs of internal democracy or collective decision-making in these NGOs, strategic decisions were mostly taken by the leader. The Russian State has launched a contradictory policy on NGOs including legislation on 'foreign agents,' which means that NGOs are living in a 'dual reality': locally acting non-governmental and/or non-commercial organizations are both welcomed

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to contribute to solving social problems and increasingly controlled. This has caused problems for many NGOs which have, however, proved flexibility to survive. Quite a few reorganized their activities, some started deeper collaboration with other NGOs, the local administration or the church. The study gives more evidence of charity as the main method of helping people rather than activating them.

*Keywords:* Russia, NGO, civil society, social work, dual reality

DOI: 10.17323/727-0634-2020-18-3-509-522

## Introduction

The increasing importance of civil society was documented and analysed world-wide by Lester M. Salamon and Helmut K. Anheier twenty-five years ago (1994: xiii-xv). Hard facts verified the remarkable and growing economic importance of civil society in a number of regions. Two notable instances from that period were NGOs in the United States and the United Kingdom, which were called on to substitute the government's social welfare spending, and NGOs in France, which were trying to help overcome the exclusion of the poor. Two decades later these two functions are still valid for civic organizations (NGOs)<sup>1</sup> in many different contexts. Civil society activities and movements uncover various weaknesses in political regimes and find practical solutions to mitigate the consequences of practised policy. In this article we will take a close look at civil society by studying a set of local NGOs in Russia that work with social problems. We will study how they are adapting to the changing circumstances in the country in the second decade of this century.

Russia's experience of civil society has a legacy from the reforms of the Soviet system after Stalinism, when some civic associations were established. This was a big step, even when the new associations were centrally steered, hierarchical and strictly controlled. After the fall of the Soviet Union, new civic organizations emerged rapidly, and the civic sector grew to more than 450 000 formally registered NGOs in 2001 (Salmenniemi 2008). Poverty and attached social problems were addressed by civic activity and some help was received from foreign donations. Around 70 % of NGOs were involved in some type of social service provision (Saarinen et al. 2013).

During the growth period in the Russian economy from 2000 to 2013, the state improved its policy in relation to poverty and social problems, increasing state funding to a number of social programs (Sätre 2019). Looking back at the implementation of these measures, we see that they brought new features into the Russian political system, not least to the implementation of policy at the

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<sup>1</sup> When we refer in the following to Russian civil society organizations in general, we call them NGOs, whether they are formal or informal, have they close relations to local authorities or not, or are they non-commercial and non-profitable or not.

local level. First, new programmes of healthcare, housing, education and agriculture announced in 2005 were not one-sided and hierarchical but were enforced by regional governors. Secondly, a precondition for funding was to make application by a local agency, which required – thirdly – that local actors had to formulate and launch projects. These new features in policy are in line with what is called 'new governance' (Pierre, Peters 2000). However, in the same period, NGOs were also facing increasing suspicion and control by political leaders, who did not like to be challenged by civic activism. How did this new form of governance impact the civil society sector?

Poverty started to increase again in 2013 (Rosstat Info 2019; Sätre 2019: 17–21). This theme returned to the political agenda in 2018 in a presidential statement and a new federal law. President Vladimir Putin conceded in his speech to the Federal Assembly (Putin 2018) that large-scale poverty is an important problem and that the reduction of poverty at least by a half is the 'key goal for the next 10 years.' Furthermore, the importance of social and civic activity among the population was highlighted, and socially oriented NGOs were welcomed to contribute solving social problems. State bodies of all levels were obligated to assist volunteer activity (Federal Law 2018a).

In this article we will analyse a set of local civic organizations, whose activities are connected to poverty or social marginalisation. First, we present the method and the collected data, then highlight some ideas and results of the earlier research in Russia. After that we will present some typical features of local civic organizations on the basis of our interviews. The concluding part of the article analyses the strategies of these civic organizations, much affected by the state's stricter policy concerning NGOs.

## Methods and Data

Our focus is on local civic organizations that try to tackle poverty or social marginalization. We take a close look at thirteen organizations from one region (*oblast*) using the official lists of NGOs. Four of the organizations are registered NGOs, three are charity foundations, which also are registered as NGOs in Russia (see appendix). Additionally, three are informal clubs, one is an informal network, and two were state-administered units at the time of interviews, although they had been independent previously. Three of these organizations were established already in the 1990s, four in the following decade and six after 2010. What is common for all of these organizations is that they, to varying degrees, seek to solve social problems on the local level (in local settlements, municipalities and districts). They are dependent on external funding, either via private donations or public support, to reach their goals. In their variety, we believe they shed some light on the civil society in Russia more generally.

The data was collected in 2015–2018 with nineteen semi-structured face-to-face interviews. The interviews were addressed to the acting managers of

the organizations and the face-to-face interviews were complemented with telephone interviews, and an analysis of the organizations' web pages. We searched their web-site to collect information about their history, purposes, experiences and activities, and first and foremost about possible changes in their organization and orientation over the last ten years prior to interview. Eleven of the studied social NGOs are located in small or middle-sized towns and two in villages. They are from three different districts within a region in central Russia. One social fund and one association of NGOs are located in the regional centre. Some comparative material for this study was received from other research projects, partly in other regions of Russia.

### Civil Society in Russia

As Salamon et.al. (1994: 3) remarks, there is conceptual confusion about what is meant by civil society organizations (see, Chebankova 2013). In Russia there has been a big variation in civic activities regionally and within each region (Henderson 2011). The official documents often use the terms *nekommercheskiye organizatsii* (NKO, non-commercial organizations) and *blagotvoritel'nyye organizatsii* (charitable organizations). However, NGO is widely used by researchers as the translation of a Russian 'civic organization' to English, even if it does not precisely mean a non-governmental organization. Furthermore, the term SO NGO is used to refer to an NGO dealing with social issues. With a related term GONGO, 'government-organized non-governmental organization', one highlights the relations of NGO to official politics (see, Hemment 2012; Lushnikov 2019). Notably, though, the relation of Russian NGOs to the state is a less central criterion for being an NGO in Russia than assumed in the western texts (Evans 2013).

Many Russian citizens have been ambivalent about joining civic organizations. In many respects this has been connected to low social trust in Russia. According to Edelman's Global Trust Barometer, the data from 2018 locates Russia to the bottom of trust index, as to the trust in NGOs, business, government and media: trust in NGOs was 23 % in Russia while the global average was 56 % (Edelman 2019; see also: SDMR 2015; Avdeeva 2019). However, even if social trust was not high in Russian society, it came up in our interviews that there often existed a high personal trust between individual people, including friends of one's friends.

Hence, membership in civic organizations among the Russian population is generally low and only 1–2 % of the Russian population states that they are members of a voluntary organization (SDMR 2015). Similarly, figures for participation in public activities are low. In the early 2010s, however, efforts to upsurge voluntary work and to popularize the civic sector seem to have increased knowledge about NGOs, as well as self-help groups and groups helping socially vulnerable people (SDMR 2015; Sätre 2019: 136–137). Many com-

mentators have further noted the changing situation which NGOs have met in Russia during last decades (Mersiyanova, Korneeva 2017). During our field research we met NGOs who were closing, new ones that were opening and those in flux that had been subject to modifications.

Civil society has been seen by Russian leaders both as a counterforce to the state and also as a collaborator with the state. An outcome of this situation is an existing 'dual reality' (Salamon et al. 2015; Chebankova 2012). The government has increased its efforts to control civic associations (see, Federal Law 2018b), but simultaneously still explicitly tries to activate citizens and support local initiatives by distributing grants to civic projects. Thus, some foundations were selected to distribute grants for health care initiatives, education, youth initiatives, human rights movements and civil society development programs. For example, the National Charity Foundation was entrusted with allocating money to support smaller associations tasked with poverty relief (Chebankova 2013: 108). Socially oriented activity was addressed in a new Federal Law in 2010 (Federal Law 2010).

New legislation adopted in 2010 (Federal Law 2010) and 2015 (Federal Law 2015) concerns a spectrum of activities that are seen as 'socially oriented'. The legislation clarified that a socially oriented organization can obtain financial support from the state, and, furthermore, has the right to receive an order from authorities for the supply of certain goods and services. In addition to government funding, they also have a priority right to non-monetary support, such as using state property, having free access to state-owned media, and training of employees and volunteers. An important benefit may also be tax relief, which a business has the right to when it gives a donation to a socially oriented NGO (Chebankova 2013: 106). As far as the implementation of this legislation is concerned, Anna Tarasenko (2018) argues it depends on differences in the regional political leadership. As a consequence of this legislation, the state has published a list of civic organizations, which are accepted as socially useful service providers – *ispolniteley obshchestvenno poleznykh uslug* (Minjust 2018). The list covered 167 organizations in the whole country by the end of 2018.

Contrary to these tendencies is that activists may be punished if authorities suspect civic activities to be 'politically oriented' rather than fulfilling social aims, e.g. by including the NGO in 'the registry of non-profit organizations performing the functions of a foreign agent' (Federal Law 2012, 2018b). The invisible dividing line between political and social civil activity is found contextually.

### **Local Civil Society Organizations**

As seen above, the context where Russian civil society operates keeps changing. Even if this is a well-known reality, it is less known how these changes affect civil society organizations on local level. We aim to clarify this with our data, described earlier. At first, we define some different types of

NGOs uncovered in the fieldwork to give a picture of them and thereafter we analyse their strategies in changing circumstances.

### **The Women's Councils**

Women's councils have a long history since the Soviet times. Although they went through major changes, women's councils still have a semi-public character. However, in one middle-sized town we met Maria (2018), leader of Women's Council. She has critical view on authorities and complained that the local authorities do not support NGOs. According to the interview, regional leaders argue that '*our town is rich and does not need funding from the region[*'s government*]*' (Women's Council, middle-size town, registered, 2018). Yet, the leader is by profession an employee in the local municipal administration. She is known as a person to be trusted. She explains:

I could just call the women who hold a rank here and say: 'Today we have such a call, let's buy sports suits for kids who need to go to the rally'. We did it easily, all of them responded. And I have such personal contacts with good rich people who have never refused me. And they still do not refuse.

She had also wide personal contacts in the region, which helps to find sponsors for organizing events and activities: trips and events for children, food aid for families in need, support for poor school children, and information on legal issues. Maria is one of many active women we met during fieldwork with a leading position in a local NGOs, and several roles in the private organizations as well as in the public administration.

In one industrial town, we interviewed another leader (2017) of a Women's Council, who collaborated keenly with the Family Centre for Social Support. The collaboration between the Women's Council and the Family Centre had aimed to provide social help for women and poor families. The Women's Council also planned to cooperate with the church, in order to create a new organization, called the 'Orthodox Women's Council.' According to the head of the Women's Council, women are more likely to be involved in volunteer activity if this is initiated by the church. She believed social trust in the church is higher than in NGOs in general.

### **Associations of local NGOs**

A large regional NGO can be set up to support small NGOs and also unregistered clubs or teams as an umbrella organization (Sätre 2019: 143; Varyzina 2014). We studied one NGO that works in a regional centre to develop philanthropy and to attract organizations and individuals to charity. It played a mediating role between local NGOs with promising social projects but no funds, and enterprises willing to support good social projects, but were uncertain whether to trust a small unknown NGO:

There are 8000 organizations registered in our region, and many of them collect money, I will not say right into someone's pocket, but sometimes there are such, well, unpleasant things happening. So, we simply started to work on the basis of recommendations <...> we know each other and if some new organization appears, there are other organizations that can recommend it: that it is an organization you may deal with, that it won't fail or disappear, something like this (leader of Social Foundation, regional centre, 2018).

It is worth highlighting that in charity work the relation between civic organizations and business is important and demanding. Preconceived attitudes towards NGOs are not the only thing that hampers such a collaboration. NGO staff often lack the skills needed to fundraise for their projects and do not have adequate knowledge of the financial aspects of local businesses: *'It is necessary to know a lot about sponsors: which projects they are ready to support, when they have the budget distribution planning'* (leader of Social Fund, regional centre, 2018). In sum, these kinds of cooperation between variously sized NGOs and with business becomes urgent for small unregistered NGOs who need to contact a state institution or a private firm in order to get access to resources and facilities, or to join a common social project.

### **Charity funds**

Charity aid has been increasing in Russia since the 1990s (Chebankova 2013; Granberg, Såtre 2017: 139–142). In 2009, the Russian state enacted the policy 'On the Support of Charitable Activity' (Avrorina 2014). It declared the state's intentions to create a supportive socio-political environment for conducting charitable activity, to promote the formation of charity associations, to assist them with enhancing their professional level, and to deploy their potential in various state initiatives related to healthcare, education, poverty relief and municipal services.

Charity is practised by many organizations that are not officially charitable, for instance by women's councils. However, here we present organizations, which have been registered officially as charity funds. Among them we have identified two different kinds of charity funds, those with their own capital and those who collect money for each of their projects every time (cf., Chebankova 2013: 107–108). A charity fund of the second type was located in a mono-town, it was initiated and run by an elderly woman. The fund was set up in 2004 based on the donations from three important local entrepreneurs, and the woman was employed and put in charge. In 2011 the fund had two more employees. The leading woman told us that she had a list of local entrepreneurs whom she contacts when she needs some support for a particular project. She took the decisions on her own about what projects to run and how to win funding from entrepreneurs. On some occasions, support was even given by the local administration or from ordinary citizens. During the second interview six years later (2017), the leader still took full responsibility for

budget expenditures, saying that *'it is a matter of trust, that I do it myself, they know I do my best and will never betray their trust'*.

Another charity fund in a small town had only one employee, the leader of the charity fund. According to her (in 2017), the fund collaborates with other local and regional NGOs, but it is the volunteers' own council, made of local people, who makes all the decisions related to the fund. They have been chosen by the two individuals who were the founders of this particular fund. They decide whom to help on the ground of applications. There is a procedure to identify whether a person deserves support or not. An individual decision is made based on the information from different sources on the applicants' income, employment status, benefits, well-being, whether or not he or she is registered as a member of a problem family etc. In this particular town, as the interviewee formulates, the decisions are also related to the general attitude of the local population towards the applicant.

This charity fund was created in 2014 on the initiative of the local administration, which was also involved in the decision-making. The fund was officially registered as an NGO. The leader of the fund said that the endowment of the fund is collected mostly by writing letters to the local companies, but also by means of notices in the local newspaper. Sometimes, as for example when war refugees were coming from Ukraine, local businesses collected money from their employees. The town administration helps to mobilize sponsors and provides the salary for the leader as well as a building free of charge. All other efforts connected to running of this fund are based on voluntary work.

The fund had four ongoing programmes: to support people in difficult life situations, to support talented children, to promote sports, and – as a new programme – to strengthen the spirit of patriotism. The overall goal is to promote the willingness among young people and children to help those in need. When working with poor people, the volunteers' council checks that the person in question *'does not have a bad life-style'* (Charity Fund, small town, registered, 2014, 2017).

From these examples we see that it is typical for Russian civic organizations to rely on the personal capacity of the leader and her/his network. In our data, women are in the majority and they have often a leading position in local level NGOs. As was the case with Maria, a leader may have several roles both in the public and private sectors. Decision-making in the organization often takes place by the leader and not by any collective body, although there are exceptions. Good relations with the local administration are of great importance to the survival of an NGO working with social issues. In the end, everything depends on the circumstances and personalities of the people involved.

### **Strategies in Changing Circumstances**

As noted earlier, political and economic conditions have been challenging for civic organizations in the 2010s. It has also brought difficulties for socially

orientated NGOs who, not connected to political movements, target their work instead on social problems. Many of them had no choice but to start restructuring their operations if they wanted to continue to follow their basic mission. Some have stopped operations. In the following we present the main alternative strategies to closing found from our fieldwork data.

### **Merging with another NGO**

One strategy to cope with the emerging challenges was to merge an organization with another one, be it a private NGO or a unit of the church or state. For example, we discovered that a rehabilitation centre for homeless persons was merged with another NGO because they could not continue their activities alone. The leader recaps the circumstances and experiences of their work:

We used to feed homeless persons at the railway station for a certain time. You need products for this, you need to cook. But sanitary norms changed, everything should be prepared under special conditions, you may feed only in the dining room, [food] packed in a special way. But earlier it was much easier, not so complicated. We used to cook in the rehabilitation centre, we used army cans and thermoses, and we came to the railway station and handed out food. No one had any complaints. It is more complicated now. So, we stopped doing it (leader, middle-sized town, 2018).

Now they operate as an affiliate to another private rehabilitation centre with the help of volunteers, some of whom are former clients of the organization.

### **Merging with the church**

The Church may also offer an opportunity for some NGOs to merge with it. This happened to a small NGO when a local church set up a rehabilitation centre for former substance users in a small mono-town, and the NGO was integrated into it. That NGO was established in 2007 on the initiative of a former substance user, in order to support social rehabilitation of other persons dependent on drugs. He was even the sponsor, financing all the activities by himself and keeping in that way the Centre fully independent from the state. We interviewed (in 2011 and 2017) the vice leader, she was a psychologist, who took responsibility for practical work.

This NGO provided professional services, but welcomed the participation of clients as volunteers as well. The director, however, fell into economic difficulties and he had to close the Centre. He had no plans to apply for funding from the authorities, at least partly because of the continuous monitoring and checking of NGO's activity: *'we actually thought that the state would help us, but they complicated [our activity] by [adding] extra checks instead'* (vice-director, 2017). As a result, the organization moved under the protection of the Orthodox church.

### **Merging with a state organization**

Going through an official list of registered NGOs in two towns showed that many of them did not exist any longer. One reason is that some of them

were simply taken over by the state. In a small town, a state-run Family Centre absorbed both the staff and most activities from the local independent crisis centre, devoted to family problems, to diversify the Family Centre's services. It is worth noting that these two centres were located in the same building earlier and some staff worked in both organizations.

To merge the civic organization together with the state's unit meant a loss of some activities, but also stabilized the financial situation, according to our interviews. Now the state started to pay salaries for the ex-Crisis Centre staff. However, they continued applying for grants and to find sponsors among local entrepreneurs to expand the range of services for children.

### **Collaboration with a registered NGO**

Instead of merging with another organization an NGO can start merely a cooperation, which gives access to, for example, funding programs via a different NGO. Some organizations find it easier not to be registered. Official registration may, on the one hand, be important if a local organization needs to keep contact with state authorities. On the other hand, several informants mentioned the burden of reporting, which could divert resources from daily activities within projects. The law obliges an NGO to make a minimum of seventeen reports, an annual report as well as quarterly reports to different state institutions, such as the tax office, the pension fund, the department of statistics, and the federal insurance office. If reports are sent via internet, one should buy costly software. If there is a delay in reporting the organization will be charged a fee. Overall, running a registered NGO causes expenses. The leader of a rehabilitation centre for substance users described the situation:

I founded the organization on my own. There were various bureaucratic procedures. At first, it seemed that [not to have a registration] was a problem, but then it turned out to be no need for that. Legislation is constantly changing, and it hampers the current main activity. And you have to monitor constantly, not to get fines, and so on. Moreover, there are strict checks in this field [related to drugs]. Therefore, it is necessary to comply with all [regulations], so as not to end up with sanctions. Last time, when I was in the drug control centre they told me that there is no point having the status of formal organization (leader, middle-sized town, 2018).

Yet, official registration of NGOs in the list of Ministry of Justice of Russian Federation gives also some advantages. It gives the right to open a bank account and to apply for grants from the state. For a small grassroots organization, for example the foster family club in our sample, which is unregistered, a solution to this dilemma can be to collaborate with some registered NGO, with similar interests. Such a collaboration is usually based on personal contacts between the leaders of these organizations. In the case of the foster care club, the benefit is that they avoid bureaucratic procedures and can launch wider common projects, to share and exchange resources.

### **Establishing a commercial enterprise**

NGOs quite often meet difficulties in fundraising. One solution to this difficulty is to establish a commercial enterprise in the same or a close field, and to use the profits of the enterprise to cover the expenses of the civic organization. One such example was a scout club, which according to the scout leader (small town, 2016) needed funding for hiking and sports. In the time of the interview, sponsoring by the local business decreased and the decision was made to establish a commercial enterprise organizing hiking to be able to share expenses between the NGO and the newly established commercial entity. Another NGO is combining paid and free services:

Those who have been working for a long time and who have friends, partners... have a better chance of surviving, that's good, it is now allowed to be engaged in commercial activities. Now officially. It became a bit easier. Some NGOs arrange art courses free of charge for one category of children, and take fees from others, whose parents can pay. We rent out our conference room to organizations which can pay, to commercial organizations. Money goes just to the projects (Social Fund, regional centre, 2018).

In this case a commercial enterprise was established to support a non-commercial youth activity. This actually doubles the number of organizations involved in the type of civic activity that the NGO supports.

### **Conclusions**

In the 1990s, Russian civil society emerged in its new form after communism and, in the first decade of the new Millennium, civil society took more permanent forms and functions in Russia. However, Russian political and economic climate has kept changing. The Russian State launched a contradictory policy regarding NGOs including legislation on 'foreign agents.' This turned to the 'dual reality' for the NGOs as they are both welcomed and increasingly controlled. NGOs were set under stricter political and legal control and even attitudes in society were changing. The civil society organizations had to adjust themselves to the new situation. This is what we have studied on local level in this article.

The NGOs we examined have varying relations to the wider public as well as to Russian authorities. Their success in social issues was connected to trust in them among citizens. The overall picture is that a lot depended on the reputation of the leading person. There were not many signs of internal democracy or collective decision-making in these NGOs; strategic decisions were mostly taken by the leader.

In the changing climate, quite a few NGOs reorganized their activities. A reason for their change in strategy could be political, for example if they had previously received foreign funding. It could be economic, such as when a sponsor was in difficulty. It could also be bureaucratic: the rules keep changing and resources are continually consumed to follow them. Some organizations

improved and intensified their work, others were merged with other NGOs, the church or a state unit. Some NGOs wanted to stay unregistered in order to avoid exposure to bureaucracy. They solved practical problems by cooperating with a registered NGO or an enterprise. Finally, NGO members could establish a commercial enterprise to take care of the NGO's funding problems.

We conclude that local civic organizations demonstrate quite a high level of resilience. Socially oriented NGOs have shown that challenges have strengthened them, including by attracting former clients as volunteers. On the other hand, the data gives mainly evidence of charity as the main method of helping people rather than activating them. This is a less promising conclusion in the long run, because only empowerment might offer an opportunity for a more profound development of civil society.

### List of interviews

1. Foster Family Club, village, informal NGO, Interview made 2014, 2017
2. Centre of Families' Social Support, small town, originally private NGO, merged to a state budget organization, 2016, 2017
3. Charity Fund, small town, registered, 2014, 2017
4. Charity Fund, mono-town, 2011, 2017
5. Rehabilitation Centre for former drug addicts, mono-town, registered, 2011, 2017
6. Rehabilitation Centre for children, village, state unit, 2013
7. Network of Rehabilitation Centres, informal, regional centre, 2013
8. Women's Council, small town, informal, 2014, 2017
9. Rehabilitation Centre of former drug addicts, middle-size town, registered, 2016
10. Charity Fund, regional centre, registered, 2018
11. Association of NGOs, regional centre, informal, 2018
12. Women's Council, middle-size town, registered, 2018
13. Scout's club, small town, registered, 2016

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