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FOSTER CARE REFORM AND SOCIAL PARTNERSHIP IN NIZHNY NOVGOROD REGION

This article discusses on-going foster care reform in Russia and analyses possibilities for the evolution of partnerships between stakeholders. The role of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in the realisation of programmes related to child welfare reform is considered, revealing that social partnership is a form of collaborative action. In other words, drawing on the work of Sandra Waddock, social partnership involves interactions performed by various actors to achieve common goals. The main characteristics of social partnerships are that they are specialised, voluntary and collaborative, and their main goal is to try to solve a common problem. However, not all co-operation between public authorities, NGOs and business is a partnership; in fact a successful partnership is characterised by a variety of features. These include mutual trust, complementary strengths, reciprocal accountability, joint decision-making, clearly articulated goals, equitable distribution of costs and benefits, performance indicators, as well as mechanisms to measure and monitor performance and a clear delineation of responsibilities. The role of non-state actors is increasing in welfare and other social services due to adverse demographic trends and the diminishing economic base available to the state for delivering social services. The state's efforts to dismantle the former state-centred system of welfare has also resulted in the outsourcing of welfare responsibilities and services in child welfare to non-state actors. Alongside their growing role, many new questions have been raised about the quality of the NGOs' activities and their skills. Therefore, the expansion of NGOs' social functions potentially generates both opportunities and risks in the transformation of child welfare. Even if there are some green shoots

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of partnership between the public authorities and NGOs in this field, their relationship is not reciprocal. We argue that Russian NGOs need to improve their social status and the quality of their work to allow them to have their own voice when negotiating their relationship with different state actors.

Key words: Partnership, socially oriented NGOs, foster care reform

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In Russia delegating the implementation of federal child welfare and foster care programmes to the regions has not been straightforward. Whilst issues around the financial resources for the implementation of the federal plans have been broadly discussed, there has been a lack of attention paid to the social environment and structures for the provision of these reforms. Federal legislation assumed that this reform could create wider opportunities for non-governmental organisations and the private sector to provide child welfare services. However, the process of involving new actors needs an effective partnership between the public authorities and the non-governmental organisations, which should be able to carry out social services that were previously under state provision and regulation. On-going foster care reform raises many questions about the preconditions for the evolution of partnerships between various stakeholders. Of particular importance is the scope of expertise and forms of cooperation emerging between authorities and NGOs in realising the child welfare reform, especially with regard to children in state care.

The article consists of two parts. The first discusses the concept of partnership, its origins and definitions and gives a brief review of the legislative framework of our analysis. The second part analyses the partnership formation using a case study from the Nizhny Novgorod region. The role of social partnerships is increasing because the overall reform of the welfare regime implies a decreasing role of state-led welfare services. Consequently, government bodies are outsourcing welfare services to private actors, such as businesses and socially oriented NGOs. The relationship between these factors in the foster care reform provides ways to understand the opportunities and limitations inherent in implementing a new non-institutional restructuring.

The article is based on an international project carried out in 2015–2016 in Nizhniy Novgorod. The Nizhniy Novgorod region can be taken as an average Russian region with regard to the indicators of social-economic development and standard of living (see, Zubarevich 2007). The area has traditionally been quite dependent on federal budgetary financing, which restricts the operational parameters of local officials. We conducted 31 interviews with representatives of key ministries, district departments of education and child social legal protection, orphanages and shelters, schools for foster parents and the legislature and the Ombudsman for Children and public organisations, including members of the public councils and the regional branch of the federal party. All of the

respondents have special knowledge in the topic, which allows them to be classified as expert informants, and their quotes are used in these terms in our analysis. In addition, we analysed statistics and the regulatory framework to determine the interaction between the authorities and the public organisations participating in the transformation of Russian state care for children.

What is a Social Partnership?

The concept of social partnership has its origins in the development studies of the 1970s, when it referred to arrangements between foreign developmental agents and public authorities for transferring best practices with human and organisational capital. Later, the scope of the concept extended to refer to the joint practices of authorities and business with a view to solving social and economic problems (Lister 2000: 3).

For Sandra Waddock (1991: 481–482) a social partnership is a 'form of collaborative action, in which actors from multiple sectors interact to achieve common ends'. The main characteristics of social partnerships are that they are specialised, voluntary and collaborative, and their main goal is to try to 'solve a problem of mutual concern'. However, not all cooperation between public authorities, NGOs and business is a partnership. According to Sarah Lister (2000: 3), a successful partnership includes the following features: mutual trust, complementary strengths, reciprocal accountability, joint decision-making, clearly articulated goals, equitable distribution of costs and benefits, performance indicators and mechanisms to measure and monitor performance, a clear delineation of responsibilities and a process for adjudicating disputes. These features are rarely evident in most social partnerships, because usually there is disparity between partners in terms of resources or power. The most common obstacle to a balanced partnership is disparity in the control of monetary resources, which is directly linked to asymmetries in authority and power (Lister 2000: 4).

The Growing Importance of Partnerships in the Russian Welfare Regime

In the early 1990s, the role of the state in welfare provision was redefined and reorganised by means of liberalisation, privatisation and decentralisation. A return to a state-led welfare policy took place during President Putin's second term in the 2000s. Meri Kulmala et al. (2014: 524) note, '[t]he Putin administration has increasingly emphasised welfare questions. Improving the quality of life of citizens has been one of the primary targets of the budget surplus that emerged thanks to the high price of oil on the international market'. The priorities of social policy were indicated by four separate National Projects.¹ At the core of the new

¹ These are: Modern Healthcare, Affordable Housing, Quality Education and Agricultural Development.

statist welfare policy has been family policy (Kivinen et al. 2016). The low birth rates and life-expectancy have been reflected in the growing emphasis on child welfare in the government's agenda and programmes to tackle the issue, such as maternity capital (for evaluation of the programme, see Borozdina et al. 2016). The efforts to boost the fertility seem to have been effective, indicated by increasing birth rates (Kainu et al. 2017).

The economic recession Russia has suffered since 2008–2009 has placed a heavy burden on the governments' ability to finance and organise welfare services and social protection. This fact has highlighted the importance of private actors in welfare provision. The state has encouraged NGOs and businesses to step into welfare service provision by enacting legislation, which enables the state to outsource its social obligations to socially oriented NGOs – so-called SONGOs (see, Tarasenko 2015).

The Federal Law 442-FZ on social service provision (2013), which came into force in 2015, opened up wide avenues for private and social entrepreneurship in welfare. According to the law, the state defines the national standards and finances the related services, which can be provided by anyone from whom the state decides to purchase the services. The federal authorities take care of the development and realisation of state policy and standard legal regulation, while the public authorities in the regions implement the legislation in the sphere of social services. The providers of the services can be federal and regional state organisations or non-state social service organisations, including socially oriented non-profit organisations or individual entrepreneurs. The services can be financed from a variety of sources. The regions have the right to create regional laws for implementing federal programmes.

New Public Management and the Role of NGOs in Foster Family Reform

A number of NGO projects are working with children in state care, for example providing adoption-training courses for the selection and training of potential adoptive parents. Private family-based adoptions are seen as a solution to the problem of social orphanhood. The effort to diminish the share of children's homes increases the role of NGOs and religious actors in the provision of services, together with the expansion of market-based solutions.

Deinstitutionalisation and the new forms of foster care in child welfare are steps in the process in which the state 'outsources' its responsibilities in the provision of social and welfare services. In a more global perspective, this trend is part of an effort to achieve greater efficiency through the reorganisation of public services and administration. One of the methods used is New Public Management (NPM), which introduces the management techniques of private corporations into the public sector and encourages public entities to use market forces to accomplish their service goals. As Peter Taylor-Gooby (2004: 7) notes,

'neo-liberalism recasts the role of the welfare state by shifting the responsibility from state to market and from the collective to the individual'. NPM promotes these shifts by devolving programme administration to state and local governments, emphasising competition within and between the public and private sectors and results over processes. NPM should also reduce costs, improve the quality of services and provide more choice of service providers. Yeheskel Hasenfeld and Eve Garrow (2012: 305) note that these aims are rarely achieved, because the quality of services is often overrun by cost-efficiency demands. Christopher Hood (2001: 104) notes that there are numerous 'managerial paradoxes' in NPM, such as the increasing politicisation of the senior public service when a managerial approach is applied to public services.

The major problem of NPM is, according to Hasenfeld and Garrow (2012: 306), that 'the exercise of social rights <...> becomes contingent on local political and bureaucratic practices <...> In particular, political elites use the administration of local services to advance their political aims'. In Russia, where public and private interests (and actors) are not clearly separated, these risks are evident. The ideological undercurrent in child care reform has juxtaposed the idealised family care and traditional children's homes, which have been seen as those, which can take care of those children who are most difficult to place in foster families or adoption. The local political leaders could promote only the easy and politically beneficial projects and neglect the children's homes and other public institutions, which will gradually decay as resources are directed towards private services (see, Kulmala 2017: 7–8).

Levels of Authority and Forms of Cooperation with NGOs in the Nizhny Novgorod Region

Bearing in mind the complexity of the theoretical framework and the administrative structure in Russia, it is easy to see use of the word 'authority' within the expert community is diverse and can refer to completely different levels with a varying range of duties and responsibilities. Following the hierarchy of regional management, we divided the public authorities involved in the reform of child welfare and who were interviewed in the Nizhny Novgorod region into three groups: (1) representatives of regional ministries such as the Ministry of Education, Ministry of Health or Ministry of Social Policy to whom in this article, we refer to this group of our expert informants as high regional management; (2) experts working for middle-level functions such as custody (*opeka*); (3) particular service providers in child welfare, such as specialists from children's homes. This grouping of public authorities represents part of our analysis of the relationships between the public authorities and NGOs that is used in the structuring of our analysis. All of these groups interact with NGOs to some extent, but with significant distinctions in the decision-making process and distribution of resources.

The high regional management acts as the main actor in the formation of the partnership between the public authorities and non-state organisations. Regional laws supporting the third sector such as Regional Law NR 52 from 2005 define both the regional strategies for the provision of non-governmental organisations and the rules for potential cooperation between the government and public organisations. Interviewees from the regional ministry maintained that the equal opportunity exists for all public organisations involved in cooperation with the authorities. Nevertheless, the majority of the interviewees focused primarily on SONGOs.

A department for working with NGOs was established in Nizhniy Novgorod within the Ministry of Regional and Municipal Policy in 2008, although in practice each regional ministry has its own view on cooperation. The Ministry of Regional and Municipal Policy holds a register of SONGOs, which at the beginning of 2016 included 250 organisations, 14% of whom work with families and social orphans.¹ The approval procedure carried out by the public authorities to allow NGOs to provide particular services for families and children is highly debated among all groups of stakeholders. As several of our expert informants noted, initially, when informal volunteer groups started to work with social orphan issues, there were more people willing to help than after the registration of NGOs as formal organisations. However, not all of the NGOs involved in these services could provide the appropriate qualities. As was noticed by one of the representatives of children's homes, 'NGOs are very different and provide services with different qualities; some of them just use the interaction with the children's home to increase their publicity' (Head of children's home, female, 28.09.2015).

The growth of the state control of NGOs' activities with social orphans was partly linked to the requirement for educational services. All NGOs providing educational support to children or intending to open a school for foster parents should pass the checking procedure, which unavoidably narrows the number of NGOs as potential partners. The representatives of NGOs supporting the idea of compulsory checking noted at the same time that 'the ministry would like us to be the same as them, in management, in accounting, in the way of working with websites and social media' (Head of NGO providing family support, female, 23.09.2015). Some of these requests help NGOs to improve their activities, but some limitations can be dangerous for the core of the idea of volunteering activities and encouraging people to help others.

Those NGOs with longer traditions of cooperation and contact with the public authorities are more actively involved in different regional grant programmes such as the 'Support of Social-oriented NGOs in the Nizhny Novgorod Region' programme in 2011–2013. The prevention of social orphanhood, support for maternity and childhood were the top priorities in this programme.

¹ The register of SONGOs was provided directly from the Ministry of Regional and Municipal Policy.

The grants allowed not only the implementation of the particular programme, but also the provision of knowledge to specialists from NGOs. The educational functions of these projects created opportunities for social networking. Those NGOs that participated in different training sessions created more contacts with different organisations than those not involved in these sessions. Therefore, training courses and networking during training clearly enhance the organisational capital of participating organisations and improve their possibilities of getting funding from governmental sources.

The high regional management not only plays the role of gatekeeper, but also acts as the main force of cooperation between NGOs and middle-level state organisations. NGOs do not easily fit into the highly-regulated environment in which middle-level state organisations work. According to expert informants, this cooperation needs not only permission from the higher level but also particular skills from middle-level specialists:

Public authorities should accept some of the risks that come from working with NGOs. Those officials who do not have appropriate qualifications and motivation or prefer to work by following some rules also strongly prefer to avoid these risks (Specialist from NGO aimed at reducing orphan rates, female, 23.09.2015).

These risks can exist due to differences in management systems, timelines, criteria for the evaluation of progress and ideas about the purposes and tasks of social services. At the same time, NGOs do not have direct access to information about families in difficult situations and have to contact families through care organisations. However, differences between the functions provided by state care organisations and NGOs can also enrich their cooperation. Some of the representatives of custody recognised that NGOs could provide special services and have unique skilled specialists. Having said that, in an effort to avoid risk, the staff in custody services prefer to work with organisations that have been approved by the appropriate regional ministry:

We met NGOs at meetings that were organised by the regional ministry. The NGOs' representatives came to us, they organised the workshops for staff and foster care parents (Head of custody in one of Nizhny Novgorod's districts, female, 23.09.2015).

Another way to create cooperation between the state and NGOs is to invite officials to take part in NGOs' activities in order to have influential people among their ranks. This cooperation can exist through initiatives from the side of the NGO (Kulmala, Tarasenko 2016) or when some officials such as the deputy of a local legislature or a specialist from the public relations department create NGOs. In spite of the fact that they entered this NGO as individual members, they still have their connections with state bodies, which are useful in organising different activities.

The latest form of partnership between public authorities and NGOs is cooperation within the public councils, which were formed following the execution of a presidential order. According to our estimates based on information from public council websites in 2015, one third of participants in public councils were representatives of SONGOs. The procedure for creating the public councils is fixed in special regulations but, according to the opinion of our expert informants, the decision-making process with NGO involvement in these activities is not clear. Comparing the membership of different public councils shows that some NGOs that have worked closely with the state organisations can be involved in the work of several such structures.

According to our expert informants, the state bodies prefer to work with individuals rather than formally registered NGOs. This tendency to replace registered organisations with particular volunteers is observable in the partnership between social services providers and volunteers. According to the existing regulations, a children's home does not need to have any approval from state bodies to work with individual volunteers. The state service providers prefer to take the initiative in managing individual volunteers and organising their activities, thus avoiding contact with the NGOs. To sum up, the public authorities are interested in cooperation with NGOs especially at the level of the high regional management. However, the day-to-day routines of state social care organisations do not have appropriate procedures for transforming their irregular contacts with NGOs into regular cooperation in social services provision. The public authorities meet some difficulties in accepting the independence and 'otherness' of NGOs from government organisations. To overcome these barriers, specialists from custody and children's homes prefer to influence the NGOs to make them more similar to state social care organisations rather than accepting them as equal partners in social services provision.

NGOs and Partnership with Public Authorities

NGOs that are regularly involved in the process of supporting families and social orphans perform several functions that strengthen cooperation between the public authorities and civil society. The opinion of the NGO representatives on their role in the process of transforming child welfare in Russia partly coincides with their view of themselves as public servants, but has some differences, something that represents a challenge for the development of this cooperation. NGOs coordinate a wide range of different actors involved in the reform of child welfare. They take part in complex networking processes by connecting the federal, regional and local levels with vertical and horizontal links. This complexity is caused by the structure of the procedure for obtaining access to families and official organisations working with children in state care. These networks also reflect the complexity of the range of organisations working with families. Families in difficult life situations need various types

of support, which cannot be provided by one organisation. In this respect, the cooperation between the public authorities and NGOs requires an effective partnership. However, there is a risk that the separation of functions by different public or private organisations and a lack of a clear definition of duties and rights may lead to a situation where families are lost and confused about their path of interaction with different forms of assistance and organisations.

The question on the coordination of actors involved in child welfare services remains open. Some NGO representatives suggested creating a special body to gather all of the functions, duties and resources needed for working with families:

It seems to me there has to be a committee on families, which brings together health care, education, social security and non-profit organisations. It is very difficult for all actors to reach an agreement because each ministry has its own priorities (Leader of NGO providing family support, female, 28.09.2015).

However, this concentration of administrative resources can also cause additional problems of monopolisation and the creation of additional barriers for newcomers and in the implementation of NGO initiatives. At present, the involvement of NGOs in decision-making processes under the public authorities depends on the particular level and area of the decision. For example, the NGO representatives noted that they have had positive experiences of cooperation and decision-making with public authorities. Some of our informants cooperated with public authorities through their membership of working groups on public councils. However, they noted that, for this type of work, NGO representatives need a special level of knowledge and the ability to defend their views. Some of the most advanced and relatively long-lived organisations have been involved as experts in working groups in public chambers at the regional or federal levels. According to some federal initiatives, NGOs should be involved in working with different public authorities through participation in expert commissions, working groups or public councils. However, NGOs have difficulties electing representatives to work on public councils due to their own problems of cooperation between different NGOs.

State support for particular NGOs is quite important for those clients who believe that government control can prevent substandard levels of service. The purpose of cooperation between state organisations and NGOs is to establish a new type of trust relationship between foster families and service providers, especially when NGOs are playing a role of active assistance and the state is acting as controller of the quality of services:

Care of foster families should be provided by some independent organisations that work in partnership with agencies of guardianship (care organisations), but this should be done more independently, making it clear that it is confidential information (Co-founder of NGO providing support to foster care families, female, 08.10.2015).

Both the public authorities and NGOs recognised that NGOs are more flexible, more open to public requests and more straightforward in implementing their decisions. Partnership with an NGO makes it possible for the public authorities to enhance their knowledge about requests from various social groups for improvements in social services. They can benefit from the experience of NGOs in creating new social services. In turn, NGOs can receive approval and legitimation from the public authorities for their new services.

Conclusions

In recent years, a significant number of governmental initiatives have been implemented towards the development of NGOs in Russia. However, the majority of these initiatives tend to be top-down in nature, where NGOs have been involved at some stages of the planning process but not at the implementation or monitoring stages of the reforms. The regional ministries play the main role in the cooperation between the public authorities and NGOs. Both sides have their own visions of these processes and their own roles. The middle level of the public authorities prefers to avoid interaction with NGOs, which come to them only in the case of a lack of budgetary funding. If we analyse the existing partnership between NGOs and the public authorities in Russia in terms of the 'ideal-typical' partnership relations outlined at the beginning of the article, we can argue that there is no real or true partnership relation in the whole range of activities striving to reform child welfare. NGOs and professional organisations play a role in the provision of some social services, but their role is relatively small in the implementation of reform policies (see, Bogdanova, Bindman 2016).

In the actual implementation of child welfare policy reforms, the relationship between the two is not reciprocal. The public authorities have the resources and authority – and in many cases the popular support – but the NGOs only have their enthusiasm, skills and flexibility to offer. From this perspective, we can say that many NGOs are semi-autonomous at best, because their main source of funding and *raison d'être* is the implementation of government programmes, especially in welfare policies. This kind of NGO dependency on funding and the everyday management essentially means their activities are under strict state control. Therefore, even if many child welfare-related activities are being 'outsourced' from the former state institutions to other actors, creating a potential platform for new forms of service provision, in fact the NGOs are becoming more like state-assisting or state-serving organisations. By this we mean that the role of NGOs is not fully appreciated by the authorities, despite the contribution that NGOs make in promoting child well-being, for example in the prevention of social orphanhood and after-care of children who leave institutions (see Kulmala 2017). The beneficiaries in this are those private actors and public officials who have enough political and financial resources to promote the reform of foster care into idealised family care.

However, we can see the first green shoots of an understanding of the benefits that NGOs can bring to governmental social services, especially in situations when they differ in the available specialists and the services they provide. The NGOs play an extremely important role in interconnecting foster families, public authorities and other actors in the private and public sectors. The majority of NGOs are willing to cooperate with the public authorities due to the complexity of the foster families' needs, which require cooperation with a wide range of organisations. The partnership between NGOs and the public authorities is also justified by the need to overcome the problems of the lack of popular support for NGOs' activities and the lack of progress made in involving a larger percentage of the population in NGO-sector activities. Both sides of the partnership need cooperation in order to achieve their mutually shared goals. To reach this, the current procedures of everyday interaction between NGOs and the public authorities needs to be improved by creating new rules and new forms of cooperation, based on mutual trust. This also requires transparent procedures for the regulation of common work and mechanisms for solving potential conflicts of interest.

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