POVERTY AND CIVIL SOCIETY IN RUSSIA

Ann-Mari Sätre, Leo Granberg, and Alla Varyzgina1

*Abstract -*  The focus of the paper is on the reactions in civil society on the local level, related to poverty problems in Russia. Local initiatives has become a political aim in the local context, at the same time as political control of civic activities is restricting to implement and further develop such initiatives. ¶[[1]](#footnote-1)

introduction

During the long growth-period in the Russian economy from 2000 to early 2020s, poverty decreased clearly. Large-scale poverty in Russia had been the cause for a series of political measures aiming to stimulate economic and social development. However, poverty as such was not the explicit goal for any strong direct measures.

In 2005, the Kremlin launched a set of programmes, focused on healthcare, housing, education and agriculture. They were to be implemented by regional governors. Even if Russia remained an authoritative democracy as Gelman et al. (2003) calls the system, the implementation took place with new features in local policy, including two interesting aspects, which does not fit very well in traditional authoritative political system: projects and local agency.

First and foremost, regions and individuals have to apply to take part in the programmes and local agency complemented political measures. More concretely, in its programmes, the state offers resources for individuals, families and entrepreneurs to facilitate agency towards increased well-being.

The focus of the paper is on the reactions in civil society on the local level, related to poverty problems.

methods and data

Theoretically the paper is utilising the frame of institutional economics while adding an orientation to agency as the changing factor. Poverty can be understood as an objective or a subjective phenomenon, or like Amartya Sen as a capability deprivation, inability to achieve a collection of functionings.

Civil society is understood here as according to Alfred B. Evans (2013), the sphere of activity that is initiated, organised, and carried out primarily by citizens, and not directed by the state. In addition to being located between the family and the state, civil society is distinct from the sector of businesses that are oriented primarily toward making a profit.

In this presentation interpretations are based on content analysis of qualitative study data. It is composed of interviews of local population in small towns and villages as well as representatives of local administration and experts in regional centres. The data has been collected using semi-structured qualitative interviews, complemented by observing and in some cases by special methods like focus group meetings. Four of the regions are located in north-western Russia, one in Volga region and one in

Siberia.

While collecting the data some places were visited many times and even followed for the whole period, while others were visited one to three times. The data was collected since 2001 but the most relevant part of data for this article was composed of over 200 interviews collected in 2012-2016 from five Russian regions.

interpretation of results

First the typical family level vicious and virtuous circles in development of poverty are discussed.

Secondly the answers of civil society to poverty are analysed. This includes among others preliminary answers on the questions, ‘what kind of changes and new forms has civil society experienced, while answering the challenge of poverty and its ramifications?’, and ‘how are civic actors adapting into the political harnesses?’

Although it is difficult to estimate to what extent the Governmental programmes have actually been implemented, interviews with local authorities and low income families reveal that they have benefitted from participating in the programmes. These had remarkable impact at least from 2007 to 2014, after which inflation and budget cuts have increased. Also, in the severe situation of 2014-17 the Government has kept social programmes running. Because of decreased real value of budget and governmental supports, the crisis is seen in longer cues for those who apply for such support.

Although civil society was indeed growing in the 1990s, many commentator have noted that doors have been closing again after Putin’s access to power. The development after the annexation of the Crimea makes such arguments even stronger. Indeed, we meet a ‘dual reality’ (Salamon et al., 2015): simultaneously the government’s increasing attempt to control civic associations as well as explicit wishes by the same government to activate citizens and to support local initiatives. On the other hand, if authorities consider NGO activities to be politically oriented rather than fulfilling social aims, initiatives taken by active citizens might be punished. The dividing line between bad and good activity goes somewhere between politicised actions and constructive social and cultural initiatives.

Statistics show the weak situation of NGOs. In general, however, efforts to increase voluntary work and to popularise the third sector seem to have increased the knowledge about NGOs, about self-help groups and groups for helping socially vulnerable people.

It appears that in the Russian case, local initiatives of cooperation with others in a similar life situation are more about coping than actually about realising agency for changing a particular situation. Another observation is that those who cooperate with each other are not necessarily the most vulnerable, but are more likely to be those who are marginally above the poverty line.

Our research identified several initiatives taken by individuals (for instance a former workplace leader; an entrepreneur; a local politician) and provided evidence of the initial stages of empowering processes. However, the development and outcomes of such initiatives depended on the contexts in which they were undertaken. Where mechanisms for supporting new ventures or dialogue were lacking, such initiatives could end up as single events, before – if ever – there was the time for them to take root.

The TOS[[2]](#footnote-2) -system in the Archangelsk region is a form of support for local informal groups to implement small-scale initiatives (Granberg and Sätre, 2017).

TOSs, clubs and meetings can be described as elements of early phase of civil society. They are such forms of civic activity, which have more space to develop in Russian circumstances than western type NGOs. This is simply because they are rather practical in nature, dealing with concrete local problems, often in close cooperation with local administrations, who also contribute to their funding.[[3]](#footnote-3) Another organised solution is a local fund. An open issue is where the limits go between accepted cooperation and non-accepted cooperation, according to the stand of the federal state’s and regions’ power-holders.

conclusions

The Russian leaders have expressed the needs of collaboration, not only between administration and firms but also with the local population. Russian power hierarchy cannot, however, solve societal problems within hierarchic decision making but needs wider participation by local people. In the same time, Russian leaders have difficulties to trust on Russian citizens, and therefore citizens’ activity is controlled. It leads Russian leaders to a complicated dilemma to support active participation while constructing increasing control on it at the same time – having probably negative effects on local initiatives and innovations. For local citizens it means the dilemma of living in a kind of ‘dual reality’, needing to find a balance between support and punishment.

references

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1. Ann-Mari Sätre is from Uppsala University, Centre for Russian and Eurasian Studies (ann-mari.satre(at)ires.uu.se).

   Leo Granberg is from University of Helsinki, Aleksanteri Institute (leo.granberg(at)Helsinki.fi).

   Alla Varyzgina is from Lobachevski State University, Nizhni Novgorod (varyzgina(at)mail.ru). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *Territoryalnoe Obshestvennoe Samoypravlenye*, in English ‘self-managed local association’. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. After increasing in numbers through the 1990s, from the beginning of the 21st century, the number of NGOs supported by the West started to decline in the face of decreasing Western funding and increased state control (as manifested in new legislation in 2006 and again in 2012). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)