PHILANTHROPIC PRACTICES IN RUSSIA: PUBLIC ATTITUDES, INVOLVEMENT AND GOVERNMENT POLICY

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Abstract:

Philanthropy is being rediscovered in Russia. Despite the growth of the Russian economy in 1999 -2007 the number of people who failed to adjust to the market remains high. At the peak of the pre-crisis growth in 2007 the Russian national statistical agency (Rosstat) reported 13% of the population living on incomes below the official poverty level. We may confidently assume that the financial crisis already lead to an increase of this share. The situation is aggravated by a striking disparity in incomes distribution: according to Rosstat the wealthiest 10% of the population in Russia receive over one third of total personal incomes. Even this official data indicates quite clearly that a considerable part of the Russian population is not endowed with sufficient resources to afford standards of living one might expect in an industrialized nation in the 21st century. Three categories of citizen can be identified who are in particular need of enhanced assistance from the society. The first such group are the “socially weak” and in Russia this includes most elderly retired people, people with limited abilities, single mothers, orphans, people suffering from grave illnesses, families with more than three children. The second group are people who for different reasons became socially disconnected (e.g. drug addicts, alcoholics, convicts released from prisons). The third group includes talented people, people with interesting and socially valuable ideas and projects.

Russian business leaders increasingly recognize their social responsibility beyond the creation of jobs and efficient management of their corporations and start to engage in philanthropic activities. Similarly there are indications of a nascent understanding on the part of the Russian government that government capacity to address the full and ever-growing spectrum of social needs and provide adequate social services to meet these needs has its limits.

The analysis presented in the paper is based on a set of empirical data from a country-wide representative population survey which was focused on investigating the involvement of Russians in philanthropic practices, their attitudes towards philanthropy and their assessment of the currently existing relations between the state (the government) and the philanthropists. The survey was implemented by the State University – Higher Scholl of Economics (Moscow) in October 2008. The size of the sample was 1,600 persons who were selected on the basis of multi-stage stratified territorial random sampling. Our paper provides insights into perceptions popularly held in Russia of who should engage in philanthropic activity, what the active philanthropic institutions are; of social groups which are “eligible” for philanthropic support; of activities which should receive priority attention from philanthropic institutions and / or individual philanthropists vs. those which are actually supported; of the role of the government in supporting philanthropic activity and of many other specific features of present-day philanthropy in Russia.

An encouraging finding presented in the paper is an overwhelming endorsement of philanthropy by the Russian population. Over 75% of the respondents believe philanthropy is a socially valuable activity because it is often the only source for individuals and organizations to receive resources they badly need. Another encouraging finding is the comparatively high actual involvement of Russians in individual philanthropic activity. 54 % of the respondents indicated that within the past twelve months they were voluntarily giving support to individuals other than their next of kin. A survey conducted in 2007 before the break-out of the economic
crisis showed an even higher involvement of Russians in philanthropic activity – 61%. This and other data leads us to believe that Russia does have a considerable potential for philanthropy.

Our paper addresses then current constraints on the development of philanthropy in Russia. This includes lack of trust towards philanthropic institutions on the part of the Russian population. We observe a surprisingly low awareness of institutionalized philanthropy – only 32% of Russians ever heard of charitable institutions providing help to the needy. Even less is the number of those who are aware of the existence of charitable foundations providing financial resources – just 19%. Insufficient government support for philanthropy is perceived by the Russian population as one more constraint hampering the development of charitable activity in the country. In our paper we argue that there is a difficult environment for institutional philanthropy in Russia. Its growth depends on raising awareness, which in turn requires improved transparency. However transparency is not an easy issue for corporate donors who may be suspected of tax evasion or of engaging in unwelcome political activity by the government, or run the danger to arouse attention from organized crime if they have money to spend on charity. There are examples of Russian businessmen incorporating their charities abroad to avoid complications in their own country.

Finally in our paper we discuss a Strategy for Support of Philanthropy and of Volunteering adopted by the Russian government earlier this year. The official recognition of these two phenomena of the civil society as “socially valuable” and worthy of government support constitutes a significant break-through in Russian government policy. The authors of this paper were members of an independent expert team assisting the development of the blueprints of the Strategy. We will discuss the incentives to charitable activity offered by the new policy tool kit and look into strengths and weaknesses of policy against the background of our analysis of the current constraints on institutionalized philanthropy.

Sources

A. Data Sources:

The Results of the All-Russian Representative Survey of the Population Conducted by the State University – Higher Scholl of Economics (Moscow) in December, 2008. Sample – 1600 people. Data collection by the Russian Public Opinion Research Center.

The Results of the All-Russian Representative Survey of the Population Conducted by the State University – Higher Scholl of Economics (Moscow) in October, 2007. Sample – 3000 people. Data collection by the Foundation “Public Opinion”.

B. Other Sources