Informal Groups And Social Initiatives In Russian Civil Society - An Alternative Path To Democracy?

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The historical development of civil society in post-soviet Russia has gone so far through several stages, starting from a period of manifold growth, developing due to external resources and beginning to root into specific circumstances of Russian society and politics (Jakobson and Sanovich 2010). Currently, the Russian Third sector has reached a level of institutionalization, professionalization and entanglement with either state structures or international donors, with formal NGOs being the most widespread organizational form.

But at the same time, participation of Russian citizens in civil society organization has been low due to several factors. Forced membership in public organizations and a lack of experience in public interest politics and non-state social activism keeps people from engaging (Howard 2003). In addition, corruption scandals around NGOs in the 1990s have chattered people’s trust (Thomson 2006). Moreover, a “Russian style of civil society” has developed (Ljubownikov et al. 2013) which is less confrontational towards the state and increasingly limits itself to social issues and service provision. When it comes to political influence, Russian NGOs have shown to have quite little opportunities to conduct direct political action because of their entanglement with state structures (Fröhlich 2012). Furthermore, a number of laws and regulations, e.g. the recent law on “foreign agents”, and scarce funding put pressure on NGOs to be loyal to the state (Ljubownikov et al. 2010).

The protest wave of 2011/12 and the intense mobilization for opposition candidates in some city and regional elections in 2013 showed how Russian citizen increasingly see a political mandate of civil society. But informal groups of concerned citizens have developed already before, during factory strikes, demonstrations against downsizing for social welfare, environmental protests among others (Clément et al. 2010). Informal initiatives are usually not led by NGOs und prefer informal approaches to social activism with flat hierarchies and democratic decision-making structures.

The empirical analysis of this paper is based on interviews and fieldwork within ideologically leftwing libertarian groups and initiatives in Russia since 2011. Studying self-organizing, mobilizing and identity work in anarchist, anti-fascist, radical feminist and animal rights groups, the paper takes a look “beyond NGO-zation” (Jacobson and Saxonberg 2013) of Russian civil society and focuses on a rising sphere of informal, non-institutionalized activism. The analysis takes three steps: First, models of social organization and activism within informal groups are to be identified. How do these define the groups’ approaches to interrelations and coalitions with more institutionalized civil society, like NGOs. Second, it will be asked, how do informal initiatives and groups approach the state, and how does the state react to them? And under which circumstances can they exert influence on state actor’s decisions, when they are usually excluded from state-civil society dialogues (Belokurova 2010)? Third, it will be analyzed, in which ways informal groups and initiatives contribute to democratization of Russian civil society in terms of increasing the participation of citizens and opening up the scope of social and political issues worth struggling for.

In broader terms, the paper contributes to the question of the relation of formal and informal parts of civil society. Therefore, the presented study is concerned with the question whether in Russian civil society different paths of democratization exist despite NGO-zation, and whether a sphere of informal groups and initiatives is able to consolidate independently and present a counterweight to an institutionalized civil society loyal to the state.

References:

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