Managing Volunteers In A Hostile Context: The Experience Of Russian NPOs

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In this paper we explore volunteer management in a context, which is both increasingly restrictive on the activities of civil society actors as well as characterised by low volunteering rates. The topic of volunteerism, volunteering and volunteer management is receiving significant attentions within the literature (see amongst many Boezeman & Ellemers 2008; Brudney & Meijs 2009; Gage & Thapa 2012; Handy & Srinivasan 2005). This literature has provided a myriad of insight into the nature of this phenomena (see for example Hustinx, Cnaan, & Handy 2010; Musick & Wilson 2008; Snyder & Omoto 2008; Wilson 2012). Collectively these reviews provide an emerging coherent picture of the nature and type of a volunteer (Wilson 2012). The literature highlights that the majority of research on volunteering and volunteers has primarily focused on studying the individual (Wilson 2012). Less attention has been paid to the ways in which civil society actors engage with volunteers, this does not mean that volunteer management has been neglect from the literature (Barnes & Sharpe 2009; Boezeman & Ellemers 2008; Brudney & Meijs 2009; Chum, Mook, Handy, Schugurensky, & Quarter 2013; Kreutzer & Jäger 2011; Liao-Troth 2001; Muthuri, Matten, & Moon 2009; Shin & Kleiner 2003; Stirling, Kilpatrick, & Orpin 2011). This literature has primarily paid attention to the recruitment activities of civil society actors in the US and Europe (Brudney & Meijs 2009). With this paper we contribute to broaden these insights on the recruitment of volunteers by presenting insights from the Russian Federation.

Although civil society actors in the Russian Federation have been battling with the Soviet Union hangover of very low volunteering rates and an active rejection of volunteering (Belokurova & Vorob’ev 2011; Mersiyanova 2010; Mishler & Rose 1997; Petukhov 2006, 2008; Smolar 1996). Furthermore, the dominant culture of Russian civil society actors (Crotty 2006; Mendelson & Gerber 2007; Spencer 2011) and the lack of domestic support for civil society actors in particular with regards to financial resources (Henderson 2002; Henry 2006; Jakobson & Sanovich 2010) has lead to these actors being disconnected from the general public as a source for recruiting volunteers. In addition to these organizational issues, Russian civil society actors operate in a restrictive context akin to those observed in authoritarian states (Lewis 2013). Reflecting this restrictive context the Russian government is currently discussing the introduction of legislation that would require all volunteers to register with a designated state authority (Vorobyov 2012). Hence this context has not only limited civil society actor’s ability to engage in certain activities but has also affected their ability to develop volunteer management capabilities. Therefore we ask the research question of how civil society actors engage with volunteers in a hostile context.

In order to answer this question we draw on a qualitative study with non-profit
organizations active within the health sector (hNPOs) in two industrial regions. By focusing on hNPOs we acknowledge that following the ‘retreat’ of the Russian state (Sil & Chen 2004) from areas such as health, the burden has fallen on them to plug the gap (Rivkin-Fish 1999; Thomson 2002). In the Russian Federation many hNPOs are attempting to provide service formally offered by the state with a fraction of the budget and are therefore likely to be dependent on volunteers and their contribution.

Despite the negative outlook provided by past studies indicating low volunteering rates and a cultural biased against volunteering in the Russian context, our data highlights that hNPOs are able to engage volunteers. Although mostly these are students wanting to obtain work experience and are unlikely to commit long-term – which reflect the resume building motivations in western contexts (Handy et al. 2010). HNPOs found it difficult to retain volunteers over long periods with a disability organization for example expecting a drop-off of about 50% within 12 months amongst their volunteers. Many of the volunteers of hNPOs were a result of the connections either nurtured by or dependent on the leaders of the organizations. Observational data also indicates that hNPOs lack time and resources to more pro-actively recruit, train, and retain volunteers. Nonetheless hNPOs were aware of this deficit and discussed at length the need to train volunteers for their specialist tasks. Observational data also indicates opportunities missed by groups to maximise hNPOs engagement with volunteers in particular with regards to recruitment.

The main conclusion of our paper lies with the insight that hNPOs in Russia’s regions lack capabilities as well as resources to maximise their interactions with and management of volunteers. Although the literature on volunteer management provides an in-depth insight into recruitment activities of NPOs, our paper offers an unique perspective of the challenges, both organizational and contextual, faced by civil society actors in the Russian Federation vis-à-vis volunteer management. In turn this allows our paper to contribute to a more in-depth understanding of volunteering in a hostile/restrictive context.