Community Development Education and the Role of the State in Russia

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Modern Russian history of community development started at 1988, when the first community-based group (Territorial Self-Management Committee—TOS in Russian) started its activity. The nature of our TOSs is voluntary activities on a local level and initiatives inspired by local residents. Community development via creation of TOS groups was an expression of the democratic process and active public participation in local life. It was actively supported by Western donors in the 1990’s and 2000’s but not by municipalities. Municipalities were afraid of local activism and had no experience or skills for such collaboration. When Western donors left Russia, only a few municipal authorities demonstrated positive relationships with TOSs and only a few municipal programmers of financial and technical support existed. The period of 1988 through 2018 brought, not only great changes in our political, economic, social, and cultural life, but also in our everyday life and changes in our communities and TOSs. We saw real growth in numbers —from 250 exclusively urban TOSs in 1993 to 25,000 organizations operating in the cities, and about 5000 in rural settlements. There has been a transformation in the relationships between TOSs and local authorities. This includes moving from conflicts, lack of understanding and lack of support, to invitations to deliberate, share information, and the inclusion of representatives of TOSs in different municipal commissions and the working groups. Now the state tolerates, needs, and encourages community work in many ways, including: • Information; • Consultations by municipal authorities and specialists for community leaders and groups; • Trainings and lectures for active citizens in different community fields; • Creation of new specialties— community organizers or manager of community development—as well as new programmers to educate these new professionals; • Financial support for communitybased NGOs (payment of rent and utilities for their premises, equipment, and salary for one or two staff members (community organizer or accountant); • Special state, municipal, and private companies’ grants for different community-initiated projects; • Different forms of public relations and public support for TOS activity; and • Various forms of encouragement and rewards—vouchers for holidays, excursion trips, and various useful gifts (this is especially important for older activists). The real infrastructure of support for community development also appeared at the state, regional, and municipal levels: new working laws, different local community centers, and many local websites and newsletters. The vertical structure of the support institutes and infrastructure organizations, whose mission ranges from information and coordination to education and partnerships between community groups, registered NGOs, and local agencies and businesses, were created in many Russian cities. It became a working instrument for stimulation of public participation, involvement of young people in community life, and improvement of local environment in the cities. According to the Association of TOS, in many regions of Russia, the regional authority invested in community development with about 5 million rubles (about 70,000 euros). But other regions demonstrated very serious financial support—Udmurtia: 122 million rubles (1.7 million euros), Tatarstan Republic: 110 million rubles (1.5 million euros), Buriat Republic: 45 million rubles (600,000 euros), Perm Region: 20 million rubles (270,000 euros). Estimating the crucial role of community self-management, the state and local governments and their agencies are now more favorable for cooperation and investments in community development. In 2016, the Russian National Association of TOS was established (NATOS). This key community alliance operates at the federal level and implements the following tasks: • Represents interests of the community-based NGOs (TOSs and informal groups); • Serves as a supporting institution, which proposes a user-friendly and useful website, a virtual (on-line) library, a collection of best practices, and important results achieved by TOSs; and • Inspires education for community leaders and local activists. Local authorities of the new generation understand that strategic municipal growth depends on mobilizing the social capital of local communities and that there is no more important task then to develop grassroots initiatives and community organizing for a better life. In other words, the municipal power is no longer isolated from its citizens (at least in most advanced territories, which serve as encouraging patterns for the rest). Local governments learn to be unafraid of grassroots initiatives, which, in turn, produce more positive, responsible, and cooperative actions from neighborhood groups and their associations. The Western term, “community,” has gained real meaning and weight in the Russian language and Russian mentality. Community Education Community education as a system did not exist in Russia and, up until last year, there were no courses, textbooks, or skilled teachers. It was possible to speak of only one real community education center, Citizen Foundation, with its 10 trainers. Igor Kokarev was its founder and president and a real community educator; unfortunately, he emigrated in 2008. Citizen Foundation did fantastic job, but it was too small for such a huge country and its activity was premature; it ceased operations. Nevertheless, now, in 2018 and 2019, we can speak about the existence of a myriad of training options for active citizens, including short-term, vocational, or evening courses for local leaders and activists at various municipal entities and at NGO support centers, which could also respond to local needs such as beautification and law-making. Key areas of community education are community management and community skills, which may include engagement of local residents with a special focus on youth, participatory approaches and practices, public discussions, decision-making; as well as key objectives and responsibilities and opportunities for authorities of different levels and opportunities and thematic areas for social partnership projects. Our new and very important task is the expansion of formal education to address community issues, and the creation of a new specialty of community organizer. This will be similar to the Western Bachelor of Arts in Community Development with new competences (capacity to listen, explain, and help people to learn about and deal with local issues) and new skills (proposal writing, fundraising, crowdfunding, participatory methods of working with local constituents, and collaboration with local authorities on tasks such as participation in decision-making, negotiations, conflict resolution, and moderation). This education is for community leaders and activists, but we think it is also very important to provide such education for city administration employees and local deputies. This will give them a better understanding of the community approach and the ability to support community activities and activists. Until now, we’ve had no university education on community issues, but universities now, from time to time, invite local activists to participate in special, small training sessions. I was lucky to attend two community conferences at Maynooth University and I highly appreciate the community education experience. I think the conferences are very interesting and useful as a model of education and training for neighboring communities. We are extremely interested in tutorials and training on community development skills. Until now, we’ve had no permanent links with Western universities, and I hope one day we will organize a training for Russian community educators in Ireland.

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