

CHAPTER

6

HUMAN-CENTRED INNOVATION: SOCIAL ENTREPRENEURSHIP IN RUSSIA: CASE STUDIES APPROACH

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6.1 INTRODUCTION

Social entrepreneurship (SE) in the Russian Federation presents a compelling case of how business innovation can be harnessed for social good. While the sector has experienced notable growth over the past decade, its scale remains modest, considering the country's vast geographic and demographic landscape. According to the Russian Federal Tax Service, as of 2024, there are over 10,500 officially registered social enterprises in Russia. However, this number still represents a relatively narrow niche when contextualised within a nation of over 164 million people and extensive regional disparities. This sector's challenges and opportunities are intimately linked to Russia's broader social, economic, and policy contexts.

6.1.1 The Emerging Role of Social Enterprises in Russia's Sustainable Development Agenda

Social enterprises span a wide range of sectors in Russia, including, but not limited to, inclusive education, healthcare, employment for vulnerable populations, sustainable agriculture, and environmental conservation. These organisations operate at the intersection of business acumen and social commitment, often targeting underserved

communities and aiming to fill gaps left by both public and private sectors. By doing so, they contribute to sustainable development in tangible ways, aligned with various United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 1 (No Poverty), SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-being), SDG 4 (Quality Education), and SDG 13 (Climate Action).

Russia's regional diversity significantly influences the operations of social enterprises. In urban hubs like Moscow and Saint Petersburg, SEs often focus on inclusive education and digital literacy. At the same time, in rural areas, priorities shift to job creation, healthcare access, and food security. This adaptability underscores social entrepreneurship's role as a flexible, complementary tool for regional development. A defining characteristic of the Russian ecosystem is its growing emphasis on collaboration, aligning with SDG 17 (Partnerships for the Goals). SEs increasingly partner with NGOs, universities, businesses, and municipal governments to scale their impact. These partnerships enhance knowledge sharing, mobilise resources, and involve students in social innovation, cultivating future changemakers (Zvereva, 2019).

Since the early 2010s, major Russian corporations have supported the sector, notably through initiatives like the Impuls Award (Our Future Foundation, 2012) and innovation platforms like Skolkovo. These efforts have legitimised the sector and encouraged a shift toward socially responsible business models. Nonetheless, social entrepreneurship in Russia remains nascent, with its institutional foundations still developing.

Despite this momentum, structural challenges persist. Financing remains a significant constraint, as few tailored banking products exist and impact investing is underdeveloped (OECD, 2020). Broader social inequalities—reflected in Russia's 52nd place in global quality-of-life rankings (Numbeo, 2024)—exacerbate the pressure on SEs. As of 2023, 15.7 million Russians lived below the poverty line, and over 11 million were registered with disabilities (Rosstat, 2024). These realities illustrate the urgent demand for social enterprise services and the lack of systemic support. Gender inequality remains a challenge, with Russia ranking 129th in the Global Gender Gap Index (WEF, 2024). This number indicates barriers to women's access to economic participation and public life.

Following the introduction of Federal Law No. 245-FZ in 2019, the legal recognition of social enterprises has improved. Urban

governments, NGOs, and universities now support emerging local ecosystems, particularly in Moscow, Saint Petersburg, Kazan, and Novosibirsk. These regions demonstrate growing policy engagement and community-driven innovation, though broader national sector consolidation is still underway.

6.1.2 Resilient Innovation: Human-Centred Social Entrepreneurship in Russia Amid Systemic Challenges

Across Russia, social entrepreneurs continue to develop innovative, human-centred solutions to pressing societal challenges. Unlike Western ESG-driven models emphasising environmental concerns, Russian social entrepreneurship focuses on serving vulnerable populations, with social impact taking precedence over ecological activism.

Within this context, social enterprises complement public services, offering space to experiment with inclusive, adaptive service models. Many adopt hybrid approaches, blending philanthropic support with revenue-generating activities such as consulting, paid workshops, or retail, strengthening financial sustainability without compromising social missions.

However, the sector operates within an economically volatile environment, shaped by geopolitical tensions, sanctions, and currency instability (World Bank, 2023). These factors have intensified operational challenges for SEs. Compounding this is Russia's limited adoption of ESG frameworks. While global discourse around ESG continues to grow, in Russia, comprehensive integration of environmental, social, and governance principles remains underdeveloped but increasingly relevant (Babynina et al., 2023).

In Russia, ESG practices are often voluntary and fragmented, lacking systemic support or enforceable standards. As a result, socially driven entrepreneurs increasingly step in to fill gaps in areas like education, disability inclusion, elder care, and employment for marginalised groups (Zvereva, 2021). These gaps create space for innovation, where social enterprises can respond more nimbly than traditional institutions.

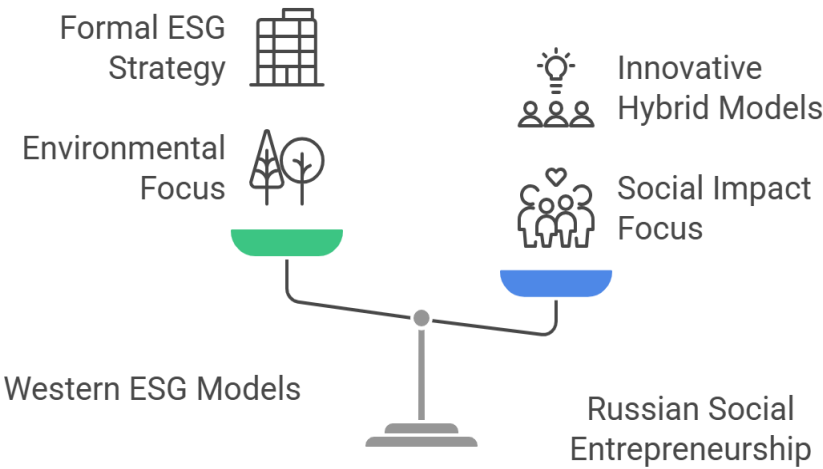


Figure 6.1 Comparison of ESG and Social Entrepreneurship Approaches

At the same time, digital transformation is opening new avenues for growth. Digital platforms now support fundraising, volunteer coordination, and remote service delivery, enabling SEs to reach underserved populations. Social media and storytelling have also become vital for community engagement and public support, further amplifying the sector’s reach and impact.

6.1.3 A Human-Centred Orientation: The Core of Russian Social Entrepreneurship

One of Russia's most remarkable and distinctive features of social entrepreneurship is its profoundly human-centred nature. While global trends often emphasise environmental sustainability and climate action as core pillars of social enterprise, Russian initiatives are primarily rooted in direct social engagement. Most social entrepreneurs are motivated by a deep concern for individuals and communities rather than ecological systems. Their missions often revolve around educational and care work, inclusive education, mental health, support for persons with disabilities, and rehabilitation for marginalised populations (Gaete & Khalid, 2024).

This human orientation is not merely a response to social deficits; it also reflects cultural values emphasising compassion, familial care, and

mutual aid. Founders' personal experiences frequently shape the direction of enterprises—many social entrepreneurs began their journeys as caregivers, parents of children with special needs, or professionals in the nonprofit sector. Their empathy-driven motivations often translate into organisational models prioritising long-term relationships with beneficiaries, community trust, and adaptability to changing social realities.



Figure 6.2 The Human-Centred Focus of Russian Social Entrepreneurship

While the current climate for social entrepreneurship in Russia remains challenging, it also presents unique openings for purposeful and community-based innovation. The absence of a robust ESG infrastructure and the instability of state support structures have, paradoxically, underscored the importance of grassroots action. Social entrepreneurs are not merely service providers but catalysts for civic engagement, cultural change, and human dignity.

Encouragingly, a new generation of social entrepreneurs is emerging—one that combines digital literacy, ethical awareness, and entrepreneurial creativity. By embracing a human-centred approach and fostering collaborative ecosystems, Russia's social entrepreneurs are laying the groundwork for a more inclusive and just society. Though often under recognised, their work constitutes a vital component of the country's social fabric and offers valuable lessons for social innovation in similarly constrained contexts.

6.2 CASE STUDY INSIGHTS: CREATIVITY AND COMMITMENT

This chapter examines three primary dimensions of social entrepreneurship as reflected in selected Russian case studies. The immersive initiative Museum of Darkness demonstrates inclusive practices by offering engagement opportunities for individuals with visual impairments. Mamahod provides targeted support for socially vulnerable groups, such as women on maternity leave. Invataxi contributes to mitigating social exclusion and promoting mobility equity in Moscow. These examples collectively illustrate a social entrepreneurship model in Russia that aligns closely with the individualised, service-oriented approach.

Russian social entrepreneurship is characterised by its reliance on government support; however, it lacks systematic cooperation to address societal problems comprehensively. Upon their introduction to the market, successful projects frequently catalyse the start of analogous initiatives. This phenomenon can be attributed to two interrelated factors: the high demand for social services and the tendency to replicate rather than systematically analyse social issues. For instance:

Table 6.1 Innovative Models of Social Entrepreneurship and Their Catalysts

| Original Idea (Year) | Catalysts (The Year) |
|---------------------------|--|
| Museum of Darkness (2016) | “Sensorium” (2022) “The World by Touch.” (2025) |
| Opeka (2008) | “Rodnoj Ochag” (2011) “Vdokhnovenie” (2017) |
| Mamahod (2017) | “Free Birth” (2025) |
| Invataxi (2009) | “MedTransAuto” (2025) “TransMedic.” (2025) |

This fact underscores the mounting demand for social services. The field of social entrepreneurship in Russia demonstrates considerable promise.

Four illustrative case studies of Russian social entrepreneurs exemplify the sector’s adaptability, ethical orientation, and transformative potential. Each case illustrates how individual actors navigate the complexities of the Russian socio-economic context with

creativity and resilience. From developing inclusive educational initiatives to establishing therapeutic services for trauma survivors, these enterprises demonstrate the capacity to generate public value under conditions of uncertainty.

The cases reveal several standard features: firm community embeddedness, participatory decision-making, and close co-creation with beneficiaries. These qualities enhance the effectiveness and sustainability of initiatives while reinforcing societal resilience in the face of structural challenges. A defining characteristic of the enterprises examined is the central role of social capital as both a foundation and operational resource. Instead of relying primarily on financial capital, these social businesses invest in community relationships, mutual trust, and collective engagement.

This chapter adopts a qualitative case study approach to examine the dynamics of social entrepreneurship in Russia. It uses the four components of social capital identified by Putnam (2007): the development of community networks that encourage active participation, the articulation of shared organisational values, the establishment of reciprocal relationships, and the cultivation of trust and willingness to cooperate among stakeholders. These categories provide a framework for analysing how Russian social enterprises generate and sustain impact through community-centred strategies.

6.2.1 The Museum of Darkness: Introducing the Experience of Blind

Founded in 2016 by four entrepreneurs, including producer Maxim Krutko, the Museum of Darkness offers immersive, non-visual experiences guided by blind or visually impaired individuals. Launched initially as a "walk in the dark," the initiative has evolved into a broader ecosystem featuring school programs, business simulations, and educational workshops. The founding investment totalled 14 million rubles, with an additional 2 million secured by 2021. Operating as a hybrid model, the museum balances commercial sustainability with substantial social impact.

The museum's mission is threefold: to offer sighted visitors insight into blindness; to empower people with disabilities through meaningful employment and creative expression; and to foster empathy through immersive learning. Inclusion, though central, is often embedded rather

than overt. Only 30% of the museum's social media content explicitly discusses disability inclusion, while 40% focuses on self-development and sensory awareness themes. Titles such as "Students in the Dark" and "Why Do Emotions Feel Stronger in the Dark?" highlight the museum's reflective, experiential tone.

The museum's guides are visually impaired individuals recruited through targeted platforms. Detailed profiles on the museum's website showcase their interests and expertise, underscoring their individuality. Staff achievements are regularly celebrated on the museum's VKontakte page, reinforcing internal community bonds and public recognition. Visitors are encouraged to ask any question, no matter how awkward, about blindness, reinforcing openness and dismantling stigma.

Beyond tours, program offerings include sensory-based workshops and collaborative sessions on smell, taste, and hearing. The museum also partners with organisations such as the NGO *Perspectiva*, the Moscow University of Psychoanalysis, and the *YugArt Festival*, building a strong ecosystem for social inclusion and public education.

A key feature of the museum's approach is reciprocity. Employees are encouraged to develop and contribute their projects, turning perceived limitations into professional strengths. According to a guide, "Darkness allows us to broaden our range of feelings and come to empathy." This ethos aligns with Putnam's (2007) definition of reciprocity: mutual help within a trusted group.

Trust is another foundational principle. The museum's collaboration with the Amadey Group reflects a shared commitment to building a socially responsible business culture. As Amadey's CEO states, the goal is to foster "conscious entrepreneurship and sustainable development." Trust is cultivated among staff and with visitors, partners, and broader society through transparency, shared values, and participatory engagement.

The Museum of Darkness demonstrates how sensory immersion can serve as a powerful platform for inclusion, innovation, and community-building. By repositioning disability as a source of expertise rather than limitation, the initiative challenges social norms and expands the public imagination of what accessibility and empathy can mean in practice.

6.2.2 Case Study: Mamahod – Redefining Motherhood through Active Community Engagement

Founded by Ekaterina Zaitseva, Mamahod—short for "Mama Walk"—began as a grassroots response to the isolation many women experience during maternity leave in Russian cities. The project started with group walks for mothers with strollers, offering safe, supportive spaces for communication, physical activity, and mutual care. What began as a local initiative soon became a nationwide movement with chapters in numerous cities, uniting thousands of women and reimagining maternity as a period of active community engagement.

Zaitseva created Mamahod from her desire to have a tangible local impact and challenge prevailing stereotypes of passive motherhood. She notes, "We are all different, but we are united by our love for our city and our refusal to accept the role of a woman on maternity leave who has lost herself—her interests, hobbies, and passions." Mamahod places the woman, not only the mother, at the centre of its vision, redefining maternity as a period of personal growth and civic involvement.

The principle of care is embedded in all aspects of the project. Events are promoted as experiences that combine recreation with attentiveness: "The package includes: a master class...and care from Mamahod." Stories from guides highlight this ethos, such as walking an elderly participant home or transporting herbal remedies for others. While the organisation's broader moral outlook is loosely framed through the language of self-development, it is grounded in care and connection. As Zaitseva puts it, "We know that Mamahod saves lives from depression, helps people recover after divorce, and allows them to regain self-esteem and confidence after childbirth."

Building a strong community is central to Mamahod's work. Participants often remain connected for years, forging friendships that extend well beyond the initial walks. The next development phase involves training local leaders to build cultural communities based on the Mamahod model. The team is carefully curated to reflect the project's values, with job postings explicitly seeking candidates who embrace "active motherhood." Every event includes a "duty mom" to assist with diaper changes, feeding spaces, and childcare support, helping to normalise public maternity and ease everyday burdens.

This commitment to community also supports broader cultural shifts. Mamahod partners with socially conscious companies such as

Chernogolovka, Samokat, and MySkazka, integrating its values into the broader social economy. Although initially hesitant about franchising, Zaitseva eventually opened the model to expansion, inviting others to “Open a Mamahod in your city.” Today, the project operates walking tours, family excursions, and educational programs in Moscow, Saint Petersburg, and beyond.

While now financially self-sustaining, Mamahod continues to focus on deepening its social impact. Zaitseva has moved into social consulting, helping businesses integrate social missions and guiding women starting their ventures. She sees Mamahod as a support network and a launchpad for women’s empowerment and leadership beyond the domestic sphere.

Trust is foundational to Mamahod’s success. Participants need assurance that their children will be safe and the experience will reduce, not add to, their stress. This trust is reflected in Mamahod’s dedicated and expanding user base. It also extends to institutional partnerships. Zaitseva consults with government agencies on family tourism and reproductive policy, arguing that current public narratives about parenthood lack coherence. She believes showcasing empowered, engaged families can shift public perceptions and strengthen the legitimacy of active motherhood and fatherhood in Russia’s social landscape.

Mamahod demonstrates how social entrepreneurship can transform a personal challenge into a scalable, values-based platform for cultural change through its evolving ecosystem and community-driven approach.

6.2.3 Case Study: Invataxi – Enabling Mobility and Dignity for People with Disabilities

Invataxi—short for “Taxi for the Disabled”—was founded in 2016 by Roman Kolpakov, a wheelchair user who experienced firsthand the inaccessibility of Moscow’s public transport. Frustrated by the limitations of state-provided social taxi services, Kolpakov launched the enterprise with no initial capital, using his father’s old minivan. His vision was rooted in accessibility, dignity, and person-centred service, forming a grassroots social entrepreneurship model built on lived experience.

Invataxi's mission is to enhance the quality of life for people with disabilities by enabling freedom of movement and fostering social participation. In addition to daily rides, the service organises inclusive cultural and spiritual excursions, often in partnership with rehabilitation centres. These trips invite people with disabilities and volunteer assistants, cultivating interdependence and community.

Guided by Christian ethics, Kolpakov describes mobility as essential to human dignity. Personalised service is central: drivers assist clients from door to vehicle and adapt their approach to individual needs, far beyond the standard practices of state-run alternatives. Each ride is treated as a human relationship, not a transaction.

Operating as a small, family-run team, Invataxi maintains five vehicles and is coordinated by Roman and Natalia Kolpakov, along with a traffic dispatcher with a disability. Driver selection is treated with care, as drivers serve as both the face and "soul" of the organisation, offering empathy and safety to riders.

Though modest in scale, Invataxi reinvests its revenue into service improvement. A new initiative—Karyalis, a campsite for people with disabilities—is underway near the Cathedral of Seraphim of Sarov. It will provide recreation and spiritual renewal space, expanding Invataxi's impact through community infrastructure.

Trust underpins the project, both spiritually and operationally. The Kolpakovs describe their work as guided by faith, grounded in reciprocal care, and sustained by community belief in their mission. Recognition, including the national "Social Entrepreneur" award, has enabled vehicle renewal, but institutional barriers persist. Invataxi lacks access to priority lanes and parking granted to standard taxis, illustrating the disconnect between policy and practice.

Despite these challenges, Invataxi stands as a compelling example of mission-driven entrepreneurship. It transforms limited resources into a high-trust, inclusive mobility system rooted in dignity, care, and civic purpose—redefining access and autonomy for people with disabilities in Russia.

6.3 CONCLUSION. BUILDING A RESILIENT AND HUMAN CENTRED ECOSYSTEM FOR SOCIAL INNOVATION

Despite the complex socio-economic environment in which social entrepreneurship operates in Russia today, the sector is poised for transformative growth. Current challenges — from institutional instability to the absence of a fully developed ESG infrastructure — should not be seen solely as limitations but as catalysts for innovation and renewal. These systemic gaps have highlighted the critical need for bottom-up, human-centred approaches to address deep-seated social disparities and foster long-term resilience.

Social entrepreneurship is gradually becoming integral to Russia's economic landscape, showcasing remarkable examples of innovation and resilience. Women entrepreneurs are particularly prominent in this field, often driven by deeply personal and transformative experiences. Most social startups in Russia are entrepreneur-centred, with media coverage frequently focusing on their founders rather than institutional frameworks. Only the "Museum of Darkness" exhibits signs of institutionalisation among the notable ventures, while others remain closely tied to their creators' vision.

Far from being passive responders to state withdrawal or economic turbulence, Russia's social entrepreneurs are emerging as architects of inclusive development. Their capacity to generate localised solutions, rooted in empathy, solidarity, and entrepreneurial resourcefulness, signals the rise of a new civic and economic paradigm. These actors are not confined to service provision; they are shaping values, influencing public discourse, and redefining the role of enterprise in society.

Notably, a new generation of social innovators is emerging—digitally fluent, socially conscious, and driven by a strong sense of public purpose. Their efforts reflect a shift toward more collaborative, transparent, and ethically grounded business models. These developments indicate a growing maturity in the field, supported by increasingly interconnected ecosystems involving universities, municipalities, grassroots movements, and international networks.

While much work remains—particularly in improving access to finance, overcoming social stigmas, and securing supportive policy frameworks—the foundations for a more inclusive and adaptive social innovation landscape are steadily laid. Initiatives led by social

entrepreneurs are already demonstrating scalable solutions in areas such as inclusive education, mental health, disability services, and employment for vulnerable groups. These examples illustrate the sector's capacity to bridge unmet societal needs and sustainable economic models.

The opportunity lies in institutionalising this momentum by creating enabling environments, fostering intersectoral partnerships, and integrating social entrepreneurship into broader national strategies for sustainable development. With targeted investment, policy alignment, and public recognition, social entrepreneurs in Russia can play a pivotal role in advancing the Sustainable Development Goals, strengthening democratic participation, and rebuilding trust in institutions.

In sum, the future of social entrepreneurship in Russia is not defined by its constraints, but by its potential. This growing movement addresses immediate needs by placing human dignity at the centre of economic activity and aligning innovation with social justice. It contributes to a more inclusive, participatory, and hopeful vision for the country's future.

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