

**Eduard Fomin**

## **The Voluntary Non-Governmental Sector in Contemporary Russia**

Since the idea was conceived and the basic tenets of civic society formed, the evolution of the voluntary non-governmental sector and the criteria which give the society the opportunity to maintain it have always had a place. (1)

Nowadays, judging from the assessments of specialists and politicians it seems that the presence in any society of a developed third sector is one of the basic indicators which manifest its special type of public incorporation. An incorporation such as this is not implemented by limiting but rather augmenting the individual character of its members as independent and free subjects. The presence of an integrative and personalizing institution is perceived as one of the fundamental indications of a developed civic society.

Let us try to present the fundamental characteristics of the situation and the problems facing the evolution of the voluntary organization sector in contemporary Russia.

The opinions listed below are based upon several sources. The first includes five empirical studies of different length and magnitude carried out in 1993-1995. The second involves the analysis of research data compiled in other regions. A third source is the material from discussions in St. Petersburg which resulted from several conferences and meetings held at the headquarters of non-governmental organizations in Moscow and St. Petersburg. The final source is the analysis of the press and the specialized publications which appeared in the last year. In fact, these are basically the only sources we can use.

This is the fundamental way of currently solving the problem of comparing our reality with some true-to-life (mainly western) examples. As a method it is viable but has only limited possibilities. A more concrete view of the present-day condition of the voluntary sector can be gained if we compare it with the position and role of public organisations in our own recent past.

The logic of our analysis is thus based on this. We seek to examine the third sector from the standpoint of comparing a generalised image of the orientation conceived for it and the conditions which resulted in the actual direction it has taken.

If we try to envision the third sector as an model to be emulated, we will get a number of potential definitions. So, the developed third sector is a social institution at a quite distinct level of societal evolution, existing in post-industrial societies (welfare states). We may define several basic functional characteristics typical to the third sector in welfare states:

1. The third sector in western societies is a stable social institution involving the overwhelming majority of population (mass volunteers). This kind of public participation is the moral standard of society and has well-developed ideological, religious and political support and approval.

2. The western-type third sector is typified by the stability of the organizations and its connections with other societal institutions. The presence of a developed material and professional infrastructure is comparable in its possibilities with that of the state. Some areas of the social sphere may be completely under the institutions of the third sector.

3. Well-developed legislation, special laws and an economic regime characterise the legal context in which third sector organisations operate. Despite the different methods utilised in various national systems, that regime makes the conditions for production and realisation quite identical to social policy. Due to the consolidation of this advantage, it achieves well-known conservative and rational structures typical of the state and a portion of the interventions (subjectivities) typical of a large amount of the private subject in the social sphere.

4. The large number of organisations with a serious history and traditions, authority and well-known to the population reinforces the legitimacy of the entire sphere as a whole (2).

In spite of its concrete forms in national systems, the third sector is today the main intermediary between the market and the state. It is the public institution which sets its own rules, neither administrative nor market-dominated.

The position of the third sector allows it to solve a wide variety of social problems:

- the attraction of additional societal resources in the sphere of social reproduction, the exception of the mechanism of taxation and the use of additional methods for its accumulation notwithstanding,
- mobilisation of present resources while taking into account the ideas and needs of the population,
- affecting the functional redistribution of state and private facilities according to the changing social situation and the appearance of new problems,
- implementation of innovative social programs, i.e. those programs which were not fully-recognised or receive common support. The fulfillment of the stated task assesses the development and modernisation of the system in general and the quality of social reproduction. But still, in some cases the implementation of such programs often turned out to be impossible without the provision of additional public means; they were considered solely on the bases of their own moral and intellectual resources and the use of an outmoded infrastructure.

From our point of view, every concrete example of the existence of the third sector is the result of the mediation of long-term contradictions and concessions by the state, market forces and the citizens in respect to their responsibility and the extent of their participation in social reproduction. As a result, the exclusive polarisation of life horizons for various population groups outweighs the considerations public assent provides. At the same time, our previous (Soviet) public organisations undoubtedly had the following characteristics and functions:

- they were founded and disestablished at the discretion or initiative of the State machinery,
- had a centralised-hierarchical administrative and organisational structure ("democratic" centralism),
- produced an important (certain) link to the social careers of its own members,
- served as a symbolic demonstration of loyalty to the public regime,
- performed the ritualistic function of guaranteeing the participation of all in considering the whole society,
- accepted a citizen into some public organisation as an indication of his trustworthiness and, for certain categories of people, served as an approval of their right to enter a special, privileged status group, which was defined by the authority,
- permitted membership in a collective, public organisation which served as an important means of admittance into the collectivized social group,
- viewed participation (membership) as a measure of conformity rather than difference, the demonstration of collectivism rather than individuality and originality.

In this way, public organisations functioned as elements of the state and not civil society. The right to everything they had at their disposal belonged to the state.

Today, each public organisation is trying to differentiate its members from the others, to distance themselves and claim their right to uniqueness. The function of the organisation is to declare its individuality while not demonstrating a loyalty to the wider system of socio-political institutions.

From this point of view we could assert that Russian conditions have certain specific differences compared to the experience of other industrial societies. At present attempts to use this experience have not resulted in any great success. The reasons for this is connected to the non-equal assessment of their outward identity which differentiates our third sector organisations from their western counterparts. The presence of such characteristics as voluntariness, independence and the non-profit character of their activity is the result of another social process, which is much different from the same process abroad.

We must bear in mind that this dissimilarity is mainly the result of the assumption of an already partly realised reality in the role of desired example. Still, "their" approaching that reality began from another tough-liberal social standpoint which contained deficiencies that it sought to neutralise. Therefore it was a result of moderate socialisation, the implementation of some kind of collective solidarity, the overcoming, at least, of some limited individuality.

In our specific conditions, during the forming of the same institutions, we must go our own, opposite way. This involves critiquing the legitimacy, correctness, moral justification for individualisation, the emancipation of the state, the re-collectivisation that was forcibly socialised. In our view, the motivations upon which similar external public institutions are based have diverse roots and assert (in their very context) antithetical values. Thus far, this has been the main context of the process.

In contrast, the task seems to be similar but the means strongly differ. As we want to show, that

circumstances can explain a great deal about the difficulties our young third sector is undergoing as well as the ambivalence it feels towards the positive experience of others.

Let us briefly characterise the present non-governmental voluntary organisations in Russia. At first we would like to mention that according to the previous tradition Russian legislation was disposed to call them public. In the western tradition we mainly call attention to a trait such as independence from the state. In this respect they normally are described as non-governmental.

In general the voluntary sector is quite a party-coloured and poorly-regulated system. It consists of several interconnected segments with little communication between one another.

Neither in fact nor from the point of legislation do they represent a single public force. This condition is determined by several factors. The primary one is the diverse social nature of the organisations which have arisen in the third sector. By this we mean the differences connected to the specific necessity and challenge which any of these organisations reply to.

In this respect we have quite a number of organisations which were established recently, but during the Soviet period. The majority of veteran's organisations, the Blockade organisations, some of those comprising the Society of Invalids, etc., may be of this type. Such organisations were mainly created as associations of persons claiming a special social status or the importance of their members in society. The socio-economic transformation forced them to change their orientations and priorities. Today their main, and in general, just purposes are related to the state. Their task is to return government to the people, those who observed all the rules they were subjected to but later found they had been intentionally deceived. When the time later came to recompense their efforts the rules seriously changed and they could do nothing but prove the justice of their claims. This explains why the basic method employed by such organisations is political lobbying inside the structures of state power. And from time to time the main sources for additional funding is the government budget.

Another quite separate segment of the present-day third sector is formed by the organisations created by the state or under its initiative as elements of the social policy stipulated by socio-economic reform. This is primarily the result of a natural reaction by the government bureaucracy to reject paternalism as a leading principle of social policy. Secondly, it is a consequence of the vacuum resulting from the lack of preparedness of the previous system to deal with the institutions of social welfare to offset the risks of a competitive market. According to this an effort was made to create multi-public structures which would enlarge and democratise the official system of the social welfare institutions. A typical example of such an organisation is the Russian Children's Fund.

But the overwhelming majority of the new organisations were founded during the period of the massive reception of charity assistance from abroad, during that period the huge number of organisations representing coalitions of various civilian groups experiencing different types of material problems were founded. They may be described as organisations of persons who themselves received charity, i.e. alliances of persons for receiving charitable assistance. At the very beginning they saw their task as distributing humanitarian aid between the different population groups who badly needed it. This distribution was not abused, i.e. it the aid found its way to those who were truly needy. Their legal status gave them the opportunity to act in behalf of the bulk of the population and to distribute it directly among those persons who really needed it and whose interests they represented according to the documents which permitted them to operate.

After some time the flow of humanitarian aid decreased or, as was the case in St. Petersburg, was used some other way. For many of these organisations it meant that they were forced to stop functioning in the proper manner. The necessity of finding new directions for their activity and common tasks arose. This was a rather unresolved problem for some of them because at the very beginning they were created as asocialistic organisations - under the ideology of distribution. As some selective research concerning the Russian third sector shows, public opinion polls indicate that organisations of this kind are given little respect. (3)

As a result, the majority of these organisations are on the verge of transforming themselves from charitable organisations to active agents of social policy. If we consider some research results, this would amount to 62% of all voluntary organisations. (4)

We wish to state that in all regions except St. Petersburg and Moscow none of the public

organisations seek to defend individual rights. (5) But still they are one of the most important indices of the development and independence of the third sector as an element of civic society.

There are large categories of population in every society which are orientated towards past ideological values. They form a real social base for the preservation of voluntary organisations which are subordinate to, passive and dependent on the state. Since it is difficult to compare their number with the previous amount of organisations (it was 3200 in St. Petersburg alone through the end of 1994) we cannot call it massive. The institution of volunteer work is practically absent. It is a special problem of our society and one which demands special consideration.

An intense competition between different segments inside the third sector for various resources has been observed. This competition is still far from being deemed civilised as the commonly recognised methods are absent but secret forms of interaction are present.

At the same time, the majority of active, independent organisations of the third sector are entering into fully-developed relationships with state power and organisations created with the participation of quasi-public institutions. In fact, their independence takes the form of attempting, inside certain limits, to seize part of the patronage function from the state, and this it is not very efficient or flexible. G. Samsonov, President of the Democratic Invalids Union, has commented on the situation stating "We're exasperating them, just because we're doing their work for them and are trying to force them to perform their duties." (6)

The power structures are also looking at the third sector as competitors for the money and goods in the business sphere or are trying to broaden their bureaucratic possibilities. There is a whole distinct complex of problems involved in their relations. At the same time, the results of our and other research show that government organs are unreliable, unequivocally strict partners. (7)

All these difficulties have prompted the state to opt for the simplest course, especially the one generally used in the past. The basic argument is the necessity of making do and distributing very limited resources. That in fact means their concentration in a single (surely the government's) hand, which could "correctly" define and carry out the basic social priorities.

#### Notes:

1. See Vituk, V.V. "Graschdanskoe Obchestvo: Sovremennoe Soderschanie Poniatia // Problemi Formirovania Graschdanskogo Obchestva". Institute of Sociology RAS. M., 1993.

2. Salamon, L.M. 1987. Of Market Failure, Voluntary Failure and Third-Party Government: Towards a Theory of Government-Nonprofit Relations in the Modern Welfare State // *Journal of Voluntary Action Research* 1/2.

3. Blagotvoritelnost i Rossiane. "APIS", n. 4, November 1995, p. 3; Blagotvoritelnost -Ychastie i Ystanovki Naselenia. Dengi I Blagvoritelnost. November 1994, n. 3; p. 23.

4. The Pull of Non-government Organisations in Russia. CAP-RUSSIA, p. 9.

5. Ibid., p. 8.

6. Ne Stremitsia Obiat Neobiatnoe // APIS, n. 4, November 1995; p.7.

7. See Blagotvontelnost i Rossiane // APIS, n. 4, November 1995; p. 2.