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The Role of NGOs in the Development of Societies and Overcoming the Consequences of Crises: Case Studies of Poland and Russia

Abstract: The aim of the article is to present the results of the research conducted by author in Poland and Russia last years, as well as to analyse the ways for improvement the situation in civil society in these countries. The author postulates the need of new understanding of the role of non-governmental organizations in times of crises, which happened in Europe and in the world in recent years (the world financial crisis, migration crisis, political crises in Poland and Russia, the crisis of European integration, etc.). Presented in this article research demonstrates, that mass-media, governments and ordinary people in Poland and Russia see the role of non-governmental organisations primarily in the social problems solving. Moreover, different other studies analysed in the article demonstrate the weakness of non-governmental sector and civil society in these countries. Author concludes that non-governmental organizations have to work in coalitions, because this way they can receive support from other institutions in the network and promote their activities on a larger scale. Networking, federations and coalitions of non-governmental organizations are the significant force in society. It is very important especially in a context of social development of Poland and Russia and overcoming the consequences of crises.

Keywords: *non-governmental organisations; civil society; public opinion; Poland; Russia; comparative analysis; crises*

Introduction

I would like to present the results of my own research conducted in Poland and Russia in recent six years. There were interdisciplinary studies with combination of two disciplines: political science and sociology. The subject of the research was the role of the non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in overcoming the consequences of crises and in social development of the above mentioned countries. Such comparative analysis could be interesting not only from the scientific standpoint, but also in the context of democracy development, civil society development and cooperation between neighbouring countries such as Poland and Russia.

Leading hypothesis of the research was an assumption, that in the times of crises¹ the main role of non-governmental organizations is changing in reality and in the people's minds. New understanding appears concerning the need of other priorities of the activities of non-governmental organizations in order to participate effectively in the development of the countries and in overcoming the consequences of crises.

Thus, the research was aimed at investigation of the following issues:

- what is the role of the non-governmental organizations in Polish and Russian societies (how knowledge and public opinion about such organizations are presented in public discourse, how people understand the role of NGOs in the development of their country)?
- what are the non-governmental organizations' functions for overcoming the consequences of crises and in the development of societies?
- what are the differences in these issues between Poland and Russia?

In order to answer the above mentioned research questions, the following qualitative methods were used in empirical studies. First of all, discourse analysis of the Internet and the mass media was carried out; published and electronic sources concerning non-governmental organizations were used. Secondly, analysis of the results of previous surveys conducted in Poland and Russia was done (taking into account the research carried out by well-known and respected in these countries international institutions, including the CIVICUS, USAID, UNDP, etc.). Thirdly, individual semi-structured interviews were conducted with 50 target persons² from Poland and Russia. Among the respondents there were representatives of business, media, non-governmental sector,

¹ Taking into account the crises, which happened in Europe and in the world in recent years: the world financial crisis, migration crisis, political crises in Poland and Russia, the crisis of European integration, etc. (See more about the new research of European crises conducted in Poland: Wojtaszczyk & Nadolska, eds 2016).

² Purposive sample.

local governments and public administration from different regions of both countries. The next method consisted of case studies and observation, including the “model of research through the common experience”, “interpretive” approach and, thus, taking into account interaction between the researcher and the subject of the research.³ The last method, which was used in this research, is comparative analysis.

It should be noted, that non-governmental sector in each country, as a part of developing civil society, all the time is in the process of dynamic transformation. New organizations are created, but also the process of decline of NGOs’ activities in several areas exists. Therefore, we cannot cover all the phenomena occurring in the non-governmental sector, including those related to the creation of the public opinion of NGOs’ role in societies. On account of the above mentioned reasons, some phenomena in society, affected the perception of non-governmental organizations, could have been remained unnoticed and not included in the studies. However, used research methods were the most relevant for the purposes of the research in terms of explanation and interpretation of social phenomena presented in this work, because they allowed to conduct a comprehensive and in-depth analysis of the public opinion of non-governmental organizations in Poland and Russia.

The Role of Non-governmental Organizations in Polish and Russian Societies

International institutions (especially the European Commission) consider non-governmental organizations as partners and important participants in different consultations, treat their position as an important element of public debate and see them as organizations that reflect attitudes and opinions of citizens (Wódz, 2007). However, it is important to know, that if ordinary people (who are not politicians or NGO-activists) also consider non-governmental organizations as institutions, which represent citizens’ opinion on various social issues. What do people think about the role of NGOs in social development of their countries and in overcoming the consequences of crises? Survey studies previously carried out in Europe are valuable source of information about this subject (e.g. *CIVICUS Civil Society Index*, *European Social Survey*, etc.).

As it is known from different theories, the public opinion could reflect effect of the activities provided by non-governmental organizations; it could be also influenced by historical or other factors. Which factors have crucial impact on shaping the

³ More about using this research methods in social sciences: Wyka, 1993; Babbie, 2007.

public opinion of the role of non-governmental organizations in society? The lack of this kind of knowledge may be considered as one of the obstacles in the civil society development, which is still insufficient, especially in Russia.

In the existed studies on this topic there is a lack of comprehensive approach to the research of the issues related to shaping the public opinion of non-governmental sector in society, although this issue is considered important nowadays, and various research institutions pay attention to the separate elements of it. There were studies of the non-governmental organizations' image in mass media,⁴ the perception of these organizations by business⁵ or governmental institutions⁶ in the context of cross-sectoral cooperation. My research became the first attempt of a comprehensive systematization of knowledge about the public opinion of non-governmental organizations and their role in the development of the countries, as well as in overcoming the consequences of crises.

Proposed approach to the subject of the research is an attempt to capture a deep hidden meaning, which put into structure what people think and say about non-governmental organizations in the context of social development of their country. Due to the limited space in the journal, I present in this article only the main, overall results and conclusions of the research.

All respondents I interviewed agreed that the non-governmental organizations must be strong and powerful in order to play an important role in public life. However, the overall vision of the strong non-governmental sector can not appear, because the NGO-sector includes organizations with different fields of activity and with different interests. They are strong and weak, big and small, active or not. Moreover, in recent years a gap between powerful organizations and all the rest is extending.⁷

Regarding the research – authorities, businessmen, journalists and ordinary people expect from non-governmental organizations to be transparent and compliant with

⁴ For example, in Poland: Dudkiewicz, 2006; Iwankiewicz-Rak, 2006; Nowotny, 2006; Załęski, 2008; in Russia: Civic Chamber reports in years 2006–2015.

⁵ For example, in Poland: Kuraszko, 2008; Rymśa & Załęski, 2008; Reichel, 2010; Reichel & Rudnicka, 2009; studies conducted by UNDP and Responsible Business Forum; in Russia: Mersiyanova, 2013; studies conducted by CAF-Russia, Civic Chamber reports in years 2006–2015.

⁶ For example, in Poland: Bogacz-Wojtanowska, 2011; Frączak, 2011; Makowski, 2010; studies conducted by the Institute of Public Affairs, special editions of the quarterly *Trzeci Sektor*; research reports of Klon/Jawor Association; in Russia: Henderson, 2011; Jakobson, ed. 2008; Jakobson & Sanovich 2010; Jakobson at al., 2011; Civic Chamber reports in years 2006–2015.

⁷ See more about the reasons, why the appearance of the vision of strong non-governmental sector is impossible, in my previous publication: Kuczerjawaja, 2013.

legislation.⁸ However, the common transparency of non-governmental sector can not appear, because it is impossible to oblige all organizations to be fully transparent and to comply with the laws and regulations concerning the publication of annual reports on their activities. Even if the majority of registered organizations will comply with these rules, many unregistered organizations and various citizens' initiatives will still remain free from the above mentioned obligations. So, many organizations don't publish obligatory annual reports about their activities, and also have problems with the overall transparency and openness towards people and the wider society.

The research demonstrates, that society expects from non-governmental organizations to be efficient in the social problems solving, especially in the period of economic crisis. However, sometimes even efficient and powerful organizations cannot solve a particular social problem and cooperate with each other and the authorities. These failures can tarnish the previous achievements of the organizations.

More and more non-governmental organizations refuse networking, and less and less organizations declare their affiliation in any network or any national or international associations.⁹ Regardless of the fact that experience shows how much can be achieved through networking, most of organizations prefer to work alone or in thematic partnerships, without joining any network officially. It seems that this phenomenon is caused by an intense competition for grants, because while the world financial crisis rears its ugly head, resources for non-governmental organizations are becoming limited.

Starting from 2012 year we can find more and more information open to people in Poland and Russia in terms of inviting strong non-governmental organizations in decision making process at the level of cities, regions and even the whole country. Starting from the president and down to governors and regional parliaments there are a number of councils of NGOs, which help authorities in decision-making process and work as an independent experts in different fields of life – from social activities to economics.¹⁰

⁸ I've described in detail the expectations from non-governmental organizations in different sectors of Polish and Russian societies in my previous publication: Kuczerjawaja, 2014.

⁹ The studies conducted by Klon/Jawor Association in Poland and Civic Chamber in Russia *inter alia* analysed this tendency (see reports on web-sites <http://fakty.ngo.pl> and <http://www.oprf.ru>, or for example: Makowski, 2010, 2014; Przewłocka et al., 2013; Adamiak et al., 2016; Mersyanova, 2010; Jakobson et al., 2011; Civic Chamber of the Russian Federation, 2010, *The 2010 Report...*, 2010; *The 2015 Report...*, 2015).

¹⁰ Recently the non-governmental organizations are called as “soft power of Russia” (*The 2015 Report...*, 2015, p. 217). See also: www.oprf.ru, www.portal-nko.ru

At the same time, in July 2012 Russia implemented the “foreign agents law” that names “NGOs carrying functions of a foreign agent” all non-governmental organizations, which are funded from any foreign sources and perform political activities.¹¹ This law influences the NGOs very badly, if we have a look at it from ordinary people point of view. Many people in Russia didn’t read this law, but definitely heard about it from the news (TV, Internet). As far as these people will not have a deep and complete understanding of what this law must regulate or prevent, they will consider all NGOs as some kind of “foreign agents”, which practically means “spies” in the Russian language. Thus, by adopting the “foreign agent law”, Russian government damages the NGOs’ image and hinders the activity of many NGOs.¹²

Returning back to the idea of being more open and informative for people, non-governmental organizations can neutralize this negative impact only by their transparency and effective promotional strategies.

People’s trust in non-governmental organizations is very important for their activities to be most effective, especially in a period of economic crisis. To help people, NGOs should have a positive image, which is a factor of getting charitable donations, sponsorship from business, as well as other resources to improve efficiency of the NGOs’ activities.

The public opinion of non-governmental organizations in Poland and Russia is affected by organizations’ activities. The big and well-known non-governmental organizations play a specific role in the societies. It should be noted that the activities of non-governmental organizations in the international arena also affect the public opinion about them (Kozłicka-Glińska, 2006).

I also would like to mention, that the public opinion is affected not only by the activities of non-governmental organizations, but also by external factors – for example: international events, government policy in a certain country, as well as the EU policy – in case of Poland.

Of course, the global financial crisis has also affected the non-governmental organizations, as well as the efficiency of their activities, including actions aimed at

¹¹ The official text of the law see on <http://www.rg.ru/2012/07/23/nko-dok.html>. See more about discussion on this law and its consequences: Evdokimova, 2012; Stepovik, 2012; Muchametov, 2014; European Economic and Social Committee’s comment: www.eesc.europa.eu/?i=portal.en.rex-opinions.30768

¹² The word “foreign agent” in Russian has strong associations with cold war-era espionage, and has been criticized both in Russia and internationally. “Foreign agent” has a clearly negative connotation in Russian context. The ability of a number of organizations to work was affected, because some local governments and beneficiaries of NGOs were unwilling or afraid to work with groups that had been or could be labeled as foreign agents.

socio-economic problems solving. The global financial crisis impacts on all NGOs in all countries – big and small, urban and rural, local and international organizations. For some organizations the impact was immediate, for others the real impact will be known later.

The era of crises once again highlights the need for non-governmental organizations to review their activities, funding, sustainability models and promotion strategies. During the crises non-governmental organizations (including charities) supporting socially vulnerable categories of people came to the fore. Moreover, in Russia, for example, authorities and the mass media shape public opinion and understanding of NGOs as primarily the organizations of social orientation obliged to solve social problems. There is even a well-established word “socially-oriented NGOs”, and basically this type of organizations receives grant support, this kind of activities is the most understandable for citizens, charitable NGOs are well supported in the society.¹³

Conclusions

The results of the research provide understanding of public perception of the functions of non-governmental organizations in overcoming the consequences of crises, and help to find the ways for improvement of the organizations’ role in social development. The results of comparative analysis demonstrate, that non-governmental sector in each country is different because of traditions, socio-economical, historical and cultural differences, which have influence on its creation. However, public perception of the role of non-governmental organizations in Poland and Russia is full of stereotypes in the both countries.

Different types of research (carried out previously by national and international research institutions) indicated that the awareness about non-governmental organizations and their activities 10–15 years ago was low in both Poland and Russia. Recently the situation improved, but there are still not many people, who know a lot about non-governmental sector. For example, the abbreviation “NGO” sometimes raises suspicion, although various social actions organized by NGOs are very popular among people and it makes positive impact on local communities.¹⁴

¹³ See more: *The 2015 Report...*, 2015; www.oprf.ru, www.portal-nko.ru

¹⁴ Analyses of citizens’ involvement in activities of non-governmental organizations were presented in research reports of *Klon/Jawor Association* (in Poland), as well as *Civic Chamber* and the *Centre for Studies of Civil Society and Non-Profit Sector* (in Russia): fakty.ngo.pl, www.oprf.ru, <https://grans.hse.ru>. See more also in publications: Przewłocka et al., 2013; Adamiak et al., 2016; Mersiyanova, 2013; Jakobson et al., 2011; *The 2009 Report...*, 2010; *The 2010 Report...*, 2010; *The 2015 Report...*, 2015;

It should be noted, however, the existence of essential differences in the level of institutionalization and conditions of functioning of non-governmental organizations in Poland and Russia. Each of these countries in fact has different experiences in creating civil society, and therefore, having similar objective, achieves it in different ways (Kuczerjawaja, 2013). For example, in Russia, the democracy and civil society are understood and implemented in a modified way, taking into account both specific historical experience of Russia and mentality of the today's citizens of this country (Tyurin, 2007, Jakobson & Sanovich, 2010). Nevertheless, the surveys conducted by CIVICUS showed, that the Russian civil society was considered the least developed one (in sense of activity of citizens and civil society organizations) in comparison with other European countries.¹⁵ In the context of last years' crises, the role of non-governmental organizations in Russia has considerably changed. Earlier the basic accent of organizations' activity was directed at the development of democracy and civil society, but during past several years more and more organizations became engaged in social work, activation of volunteering and charitable initiatives.¹⁶

However, in spite of the differences in the development of civil society, in socio-economic situation and in conditions of functioning of non-governmental organizations in Poland and Russia, there are also common characteristics.

According to the results of comparative analysis, the public opinion about non-governmental organizations in both countries in the perspective of recent years becomes more positive, although it is still ambivalent. On the one hand, people say that non-governmental organizations are more efficient than the government, but on the other hand, when we investigate the overall public opinion about the entire NGO-sector, it is not the best. Taking into account indicators of people's involvement in NGOs' activities, a fairly high percentage of respondents of surveys declare their readiness to participate in volunteer work and social actions. This fact means that people consider such activities and non-governmental organizations as important and worth spending their time (Adamiak et al., 2016; Mersiyanova, 2013; *The 2015 Report...*, 2015).

Both in Russia and Poland the authorities and various institutions, which determine the development of the countries, show the growing interest in non-governmental organizations, inviting them to the consultations to express their opinions about legislative changes or the development of various types of state policies and programs. It is said that thanks to non-governmental organizations citizens gain a chance of having an influence on the achievement of development goals. However, several studies

¹⁵ See more on www.civicus.org

¹⁶ See more: www.oprf.ru, www.portal-nko.ru

lead to some scepticism concerning real readiness of national and European political actors to cooperate with non-governmental organizations.

Summing up the analyses presented in this article, I can resume that leading hypothesis was confirmed by the studies. During the 25 years after the system's transformations in Poland and Russia the main priority of the non-governmental organizations' activity was the development of civil society, but in the current era of crises, NGOs' priorities must be changed.¹⁷ Regarding to public opinion research, people believe that non-governmental organizations, first of all, have to solve basic everyday social problems, and now the main priority of NGOs' activity should be specific actions in the social sphere and real direct help for people.

We observe the relative weakness of non-governmental sector, but it is known that NGOs can have an influence on social processes and development, so results of the research can be used to develop recommendations for reinforcement and consolidation of the non-governmental sectors in Poland and Russia in order to overcome the consequences of crises.

On the basis of the research results, I'd like to recommend, first of all, more active work in coalitions, where non-governmental organizations can receive support from other institutions in the network and promote their activities on a larger scale. Networking, federations and coalitions of non-governmental organizations are the significant force in society. It is very important to remember especially in a context of social development of Poland and Russia and overcoming the consequences of crises.

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¹⁷ In this context I agree with Polish researcher Grzegorz Makowski (2014), that „a strong civil society does not necessarily contribute directly to a good political and economic situation”.

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Internet Resources:

Centre for Studies of Civil Society and Non-Profit Sector <https://grans.hse.ru/English>

Centrum Badań Opinii Społecznej <http://www.cbos.com.pl>

European Social Survey <http://www.europeansocialsurvey.org>

Civic Chamber of the Russian Federation <http://www.oprf.ru>

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