Civil Activism without NGOs: The Communist Party as a Civil Society Substitute

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After a decade of postcommunist development in Russia, the Communist Party of the Russian Federation (KPRF) remains the largest political force in the country. The regions of the so-called Red Belt (mostly in agrarian southern Russia) are still politically dominated by the communists. Although inhabitants of big cities even in those regions usually vote for more liberal parties (such as Yabloko or SPS), people in small cities and in the villages support KPRF candidates. The virtual absence of civil society institutions is also commonplace, according to reports from such regions. That phenomenon is usually seen as a result of the conservatism or indifference of the agrarian population, the tight control of local authorities over the election processes, or economic impediments. All of those factors do exist. However, such statements prevent analysts from looking into the mechanisms of political interactions at the local level. In fact, many small cities of the Red Belt have many institutions of civil society, which work on local problems and defend the interests of the "common man" before the state authorities. To see them, one merely needs to eliminate the ideological dimension from one's analysis and realize that those institutions exist within the KPRF. A model example of such a situation may be seen in Uryupinsk, in the Volgograd region.

From many viewpoints Uryupinsk is the "capital city of Russia's provinces." Its name is so widely used in anecdotes about Russian "country bumpkins" that many Russians believe that it is the creation of some storyteller. Uryupinsk, however, really exists. About forty thousand inhabitants enjoy a healthy and picturesque environment on the river Khoper, three hundred kilometers (about two hundred miles) from Volgograd. This old Cossack town is now the center of a rural district. Major industries include the production of sunflower oil and agricultural machinery, but city authorities hope that the engine for the city's future economy will be goat down. Women there knit shawls that are not only warm,

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but also very beautiful. City mayor Valery Sushko entertains hopes that Uryupinsk shawls will compete with Angora knitted goods. He has publicly boasted that there are more goats in Uryupinsk than there are people, in part exploiting the anecdotal image of the city to attract more attention.

Given Russia's current economic and social turmoil, Uryupinsk is doing pretty well for a Russian provincial city. It has an active population and ambitious city authorities. Unlike many Russian provincial towns, it has a sense of community, and citizens of Uryupinsk tend to be proud of their city. Uryupinsk is situated far away from the major Volgograd-Moscow highway that siphons the most active population to either the national or regional capital. It is one of the few Russian provincial cities to win a grant from the Open Society Institute (Soros Foundation) for the promotion of city development. Mayor Sushko was invited to the United States recently for a tour that was sponsored in part by Soros.

Western observers may be surprised that a relatively large and prosperous city is solving its problems and developing a civil society without the active participation of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), which often play a key role in developing and sustaining robust civil societies. The local cell of the Communist Party of the Russian Federation, however, appears to have taken the place of NGOs in Uryupinsk. The KPRF is not only the largest organization in Uryupinsk, it is also the only active one. Uryupinsk citizens support KPRF candidates in all national and regional elections. In the 2000 presidential elections, Putin lost in Uryupinsk to KPRF leader Gennady Zyuganov by 41.5 percent to 47.4 percent, while even in the surrounding Uryupinsk district (*rayon*) Putin won 45.8 percent to 44.8 percent.[1] The city also voted for Communist incumbent governor Nikolai Maksyuta in the Volgograd gubernatorial elections on 24 December 2000. He received 55.87 percent of the vote, while his major competitor, Oleg Savchenko, received 21.02 percent.[2] The only other significant organization that has developed in Uryupinsk was a Cossack revival movement, which was quite active in the early 1990s but now hardly exists. No organization other than KPRF is needed, and so the chance for NGOs to develop and receive widespread support is small.

The Communist Party as a Civic Organization

Conventional wisdom tends to view the contemporary Communist Party as, first of all, an ideology-driven political organization aimed at regaining control of power. If one reads program documents or looks at the KPRF's legislation, he finds nothing challenging that image. However, the KPRF in Uryupinsk is not just about that. To be sure, it is still a part of the larger structure of the KPRF and helps to get its candidates elected to the regional legislature and the Russian State Duma. In a provincial Russian city, however, there is no real political struggle. No ideologies, political programs, or even bright candidates are competing ain local elections. The KPRF has no competitor organization. Given that, what could be the substance of the organization's everyday activities?

Surprisingly, for an external observer (and quite naturally for a local one), Uryupinsk communists are particularly active in promotion of local interests. The

prominent figures in the local party organization are the principal backers of the Uryupinsk educational system and of city improvements. They are, generally speaking, the only civic activists in the area. It is possible to argue that the Communist Party in Uryupinsk acts as a kind of substitute for those structures called civil society in the West. Why did the communists in Uryupinsk become a kind of quasi civic organization? To analyze that phenomenon we need to look, first, at the evolution of the local organization of the Communist Party, and second, at the changes in the social behavior of the active citizens of Uryupinsk.

One of the main traditions of understanding civil society envisions it as a set of associations that mediates relations between an individual and the strong state and defends the former from the encroachments of the latter. The long-time domination of the Communist Party led to the destruction of all the potential rival organizations in the city. During the civil war and the subsequent decade, Cossack organizations such as *krug* (self-government) were smashed out of existence. The Russian Orthodox Church hardly survived the Soviet epoch, and today's religious revival is still mostly a matter of fashion. No organized interest group was permitted within the Soviet system. Even Soviet "trade unions" appeared to be labor departments of the same state-party machine.

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Communists did not just destroy those organizations, they appropriated most of their responsibilities. Like the church, the Communist Party regulated the consciences and family lives of citizens. It also tried to usurp the role of local government and other groups that defended local interests. Local party organizations dominated or functioned as clubs, women's organizations, and educational boards. All the civic activism that appeared in the Soviet era was channeled into existing party/state-controlled organizations.

In Soviet times those were hardly the only or main tasks of local party organizations. However, now that the KPRF is no more the party of power, its major activity on the local level focuses on what were previously secondary goals. Moreover, if, during the Soviet era, networks of organizations controlled by the governing Communist Party prevented the creation of real civil society, the situation has changed since the Communist Party and the state became different entities. Communist-controlled networks in many instances play the role of mediators between state and individual. The Communist Party managed to survive the ideological turbulence of the last decade and positioned itself on the local level as a power defending the interests of common people. The Soviet value of collectivism, also appropriated as a communist legacy, helped the KPRF to play that mediating role. Communists just filled the niche that no other political force was able to fill.

In the early 1990s, communist organizations composed the only existing nationwide network of civil activists. Newly democratic networks did appear in the big cities, or in the regions with diverse economic and social structures. However, in cities such as Uryupinsk, the only alternative that appeared at the time was a Cossack revival organization. The Cossack group tried to claim its "right" to govern in that former Cossack region but was able neither to force existing authorities to share power nor to attract the sympathy of the population.[3] Finally, Cossack organizations developed into either folklore ensembles or quasi law-enforcement groups, somewhere in between racketeering gangs and private security guards.

Using its nationwide network of local organizations, the Communist Party recreated not only a political party but a horizontal structure of civil society organizations. Most of the *zhensovets* (women's councils) are still communist dominated, as are many trade unions, especially in agriculture and related food-processing industries. Among the products of the Soviet era, the street committees (*ulichnye komitety*) are the most powerful organizations at the grassroots level. Created and staffed under Communist Party rule, they continue assisting the KPRF to reach literally everyone living in Uryupinsk's neighborhoods. According to Moscow journalist Nadezhda Andreeva (who repeated the sighs of an Uryupinsk businessman about the absence of civil society in his city), there are forty street committees in Uryupinsk. They first proved their usefulness in the late Soviet epoch of shortages as a means to ensure fair distribution of goods. Now Evgenia Ivleva, chairperson of one of the committees, supervises more than three hundred households with some six hundred inhabitants. "Every morning Evgenia examines her neighborhood and directs people to clean [garbage]. Two or three times a week she visits her neighbors and, being waked at midnight[,] will know who lives where, what problems they face, and who of the visitors is suspicious. As a kind of justice of the peace she settles conflicts between neighbors, writes recommendations and certificates for her neighbors."[4]

Mayor Sushko praised street committees as a vital part of local government in his interview with *Rossiskaya gazeta* in October 2001:

> Our chairs of street committees are doing a great job. There are ninety persons [working as chairs].[5] We pay each of them two minimal salaries a month. They can work as a sanitary inspector, help the local police officer. They can certify some papers for an inhabitant of their neighborhood, write a reference for him. When I hear about some new problem . . ., I never make a decision before I hear the opinion of a chair of a street committee. About half of the problems and conflicts are being solved with their assistance.[6]

Another journalist, Dmitri Petrov, described in an impressionist manner the creation of what he called the "political machine of Mayor Sushko":

> The mayor . . . decided to lay out numerous flower beds in Uryupinsk. The city would be more beautiful! Let the public go to *subbotnik* [a day of free labor for public needs]! However, the public [activists] . . . responded: "Okay, we will plant flowers, but . . . will you give us two more kindergarten teachers, and some sidewalk borders to build, and some sand for playgrounds . . . [?]" "Well," answered the

mayor, "I will give two teachers, and whatever else you want to have, and even create a city council of public self-government. And you will, in turn, organize *subbotnik* for flower planting and, then, convince your neighborhoods to elect the right people in the coming elections!" The public activists agreed.[7]

As demonstrated above, the local street committees may turn into a mighty propaganda tool during the election campaigns. And because the chairs of the committees are members of or sympathizers with the KPRF, that tool is still in the hands of the Communist Party. The official Web site of Uryupinsk describes the heads of street committees as the mayor's appointees, saying, "[W]e try to improve the quality of the list [of the heads of street committees], we are looking for more literate, young, energetic people . . . and to pay them for their job."[8] This may be the attempt of Sushko's team to compete with the KPRF, or it may represent the need to recruit a new generation into the local government.

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In spite of the street committees' role in political campaigning, this "political machine" is pretty close to the ideal type of local government. It may be Communist, or Democratic, or Republican—the essence of the interaction would be the same. The people who lead street committees are imposed neither from the top nor by criminal groups, as is the case with many levels of authority in different Russian cities. The interest they defend is not immediately connected to politics or property redistribution. The survival of that old Soviet type of local government in Uryupinsk—street committees are dead in the vast majority of Russian cities—created the base for the confidence of Mayor Sushko and the efficiency of local authorities.

The traditional influence of the KPRF on the street committees (or rather, on the chairpersons) transforms into the chairpersons' direct, though infrequent, involvement in party political struggles, usually during regional and federal election campaigns. The final reason for the continued dominance of the KPRF is the scarcity of resources in the small cities. Whereas inhabitants of large cities have better access to funds from various foundations and state and regional budgets allocated for the development of citizens' organizations, and even information about such possibilities, local activists in cities like Uryupinsk experience a shortage of resources and neglect from national and international foundations. The Communist Party can mobilize its own resources in support of local initiatives and, in regions such as Volgograd, where the KPRF controls the regional legislature, promote local initiatives at the regional level. The continual fight for budget allocations between the city of Volgograd and the regional administration is caused by the redistribution of funds from the more diversified, affluent, and democratic regional capital to the communist-controlled, poor agricultural districts.

Analyzing the relationship between the KPRF and levels of public activism, one can assume the existence of some kind of informal agreement. The local KPRF organization provides political and organizational support for the regional communist leadership during elections in exchange for assistance with the allocation of regional and party funds for local goals.

The Open Society Institute of the Soros Foundation started its program "Small Cities of Russia" in spring 2000, partly to give citizens of the small cities better access to Western funding for their local initiatives.[9] The Uryupinsk city administration won one of thirty-five initial grants. That was possible because of unprecedented efforts on the part of OSI to reach city authorities, the popularity of the name of the city, and OSI awareness of the relative lack of experience of small city authorities in writing grant applications. That is so far the only external source of financial support for local development.

Local Activists: Career Paths and Choices

Russian provinces have no tradition of self-representation of public interests (or, one could say, such a tradition was forgotten during the Soviet period of Russian history). The authorities were considered responsible for everything. However, that does not mean that interest in self-representation is nil. Uryupinsk is just one of the brightest examples of quasi civil society existing in the form of a local communist organization. To understand the phenomenon we should analyze the career options and goals of the local civic activists.

The Communist Party of the Soviet Union was the only legal political party of that era; it also was the only body that permitted (and demanded) some kind of public activity by its members. In fact, it absorbed nearly all the public affairs activity in the USSR. To achieve any advanced career goals or hold many occupations (for instance, lawyer or journalist), one had to be a member of the KPSS (*Kommunisticheskaya partiya Sovetskogo Soyuza*, or CPSU). All local public workers were usually communists who helped the party to control local activism.

Party membership is no longer a prerequisite for any occupation in Russia. However, most of the careers in a small city still start in the communist ranks, and local activism demands close collaboration if not formal membership in KPRF cells. That is a matter of rational choice for active Uryupinsk citizens. People who want to pursue public service goals have two major options in building their careers. The first is to leave their city for a bigger one, such as a regional or national capital, and try to build their life there. Russian minister of education Vladimir Filippov was born in Uryupinsk but moved to Moscow at the age of seventeen. Many people choose that path, which incidentally helps explain the existence of so many sleeping, stagnating small cities in Russia's countryside.

Those who stay in their native Uryupinsk (or return there after graduation from a university) face the reality that the only powerful network is the KPRF. If they choose to create their own independent organization, the absence of funds, remoteness of partners, and other obstacles will effectively prevent their organization from achieving its primary goal; meanwhile, joining the KPRF network immediately gives them access to funds, organizational structure, and, last but not

least, career possibilities. The easiest career path (at least on the local and Volgograd regional levels) still goes through the Communist Party. Certainly, there are small cities in Russia where alternative career paths are possible, with active NGOs or trade unions, such as the coal mining cities in South Siberia, or with influential competing parties' cells (Yabloko in some formerly closed scientific/defense cities). However, Uryupinsk represents a typical example of the center of an agricultural district in the Red Belt of Russia. What makes Uryupinsk unique is the considerable strength of its local community in promoting its specific interests, which attracts more young people to the career path of public activism. That path naturally leads them into KPRF ranks.

The ideological component of KPRF activity does not prevent most local activists from joining. Many of them have no political preferences or consider ideology something not linked to their everyday activities. Very few would refuse communist support for ideological reasons. When Igor Babichev—a member of the Yabloko faction in the Russian State Duma in 1995–99 and the executive director, since 2000, of the All-Russian Association of Small and Middle-Size Cities and Municipal Entities, who was born in Uryupinsk—praised the Uryupinsk electorate for choosing "doctors, teachers and engineers for city council" in 1996, he did not point to their political affiliation—not from party envy but because it was in fact not important.[10]

The most influential person in the Uryupinsk Communist Party is Tamara Gornyakova, who is the head of the Uryupinsk branch of Volgograd State University and, until recently, was a deputy of Volgograd's regional Duma. She has not acted ideologically and has not actively supported the KPRF's national or regional political goals. Instead, she has championed the local educational system, and she did much to bring about the establishment of the first branch of Volgograd State University in Uryupinsk. Recently, Gornyakova was appointed vice mayor of Uryupinsk. Mayor Sushko, while peacefully coexisting with the KPRF, refuses to discuss political themes when he speaks for the city authorities and accepted George Soros's grant despite general suspicion by the KPRF of Soros and his philanthropy.[11] Street committee chairwoman Evgenia Ivleva has been doing her job for about twenty years, the first ten years under the Soviet regime, and the second in free Russia. In fact, the same civic activists who during the Soviet era were found in the KPSS ranks now go to the KPRF cells or KPRF-controlled organizations.

The low priority given to ideological labels on the local level is illustrated by the career evolution of Vladimir Plotnikov, a Duma deputy from the Mikhailovsky electoral district, which includes Uryupinsk. Deputy Plotnikov changed his party affiliation from the left-wing Agrarian Party in the first Duma and was elected as an independent in the current parliament (although he was continually supported by the communist organizations). That drift may symbolize the changes that took place in the attitudes of Uryupinsk communists: during the 1990s they steadily loosened their ideological image while improving their infrastructure capacity. Plotnikov is currently the chair of the Agrarian Committee of the State Duma.

Certainly, there have been some changes. The ideology and propaganda that were the dominant features of the Soviet-era Communist Party cells are now much less popular in Uryupinsk. Members of the KPRF in Uryupinsk can even pretend that they have nothing in common with national communist leaders and their programs. Senior citizens tend to be more ideology-driven, but the middle-aged are more concerned with local improvements, and the younger generation is looking for career opportunities. There is no proof that a career path started within KPRF can lead to the top of the Russian state. The federal nomenklatura does not recruit KPRF members. So the motivation of today's younger communists differs from that of Soviet-era youth.

Most Uryupinsk businessmen made their fortunes as middlemen in trade for the oil-extracting plant, but some also started bakeries and service-oriented businesses. Recently, the first independent business association, the Union of Entrepreneurs (*Soyuz predprinimatelei*), was formed in Uryupinsk. Mayor Sushko mentioned the group's assistance in organizing city festivities and lamented that the money they spent did not go to another computer class for schoolchildren.[12] There are no signs that this business association is going to compete with the KPRF politically, but its appearance is a symbol of changes in Uryupinsk's social structure.

At the local level, the Communist Party in Russia is strong not only because its agenda is compatible with the wishes of the impoverished population, but also because it is the only "institution of civil society" existing there. Much of the population has no idea what civil society in the Western sense is, and people attribute many of its presumed features to their local Communist Party. It is significant that Mayor Sushko, invited to a Duma conference devoted to local democracy, chose to speak only about taxation problems, making no reference to civil society.[13]

There are several important conclusions that follow from the analysis of the Uryupinsk situation. Democracy building in Russia in the 1990s started from the top with the organization of free elections of president, governors, and State Duma deputies. All those levels of power are remote from the everyday lives of citizens in cities such as Uryupinsk. For most of them "democracy" still has no real meaning; it is just an empty word. Local government leaders, who pursue goals that are understandable and achieve results that are verifiable, demand more active participation from the citizens. On that level, the workings of government have not changed too much since Soviet times.

However, there are some important differences. First, there is less top-down dictation from either party or state authorities. That leaves more room for local initiatives. Second, the ideology of the KPRF is directed more narrowly to politics; it interferes less with other arenas. Finally, the interaction between local activists and party tycoons remains a kind of informal agreement—political support in exchange for access to party resources. Both get what they want.

Civil society may be spread in two ways in Russia's provinces: through the creation of alternative networks (the route that many Western philanthropists such as George Soros have chosen to support), and through work with local communist organizations and local activists to encourage their independence from ideo-

logical party tycoons. It may sound strange, but inviting local leaders from communist organizations to join Western-sponsored training for civil society activists and including them in existing networks may be a step in the right direction.

The role of the local Communist Party organization varies in the different regions of Russia and in different types of small cities. Obviously, citizens of a high-tech, formerly closed city will demonstrate a very different attitude toward the KPRF. However, at least for Uryupinsk and some other small cities in the Red Belt that serve primarily as centers of agricultural districts, the role of the KPRF differs from what is usually thought, and warrants further research.

NOTES

1. *Uryupinskaya Pravda,* 30 March 2000.
2. *Uryupinskaya Pravda,* 28 December 2000.
3. Cossack organizations are relatively successful in the "frontier" regions of south Russia, which border the ethnic republics of North Caucasus, but that was not the case for quiet Uryupinsk.
4. Nadezhda Andreeva, "Uryupinsk—brand rossiyskoi provintsii," *Gorodskie vesti* (Volgograd), 12 February 2002.
5. The difference in figures between Andreeva and Sushko was probably caused by the mayor's inclusion of chairs of "house committees" (*domovie komitety*), which play a role similar to that of street committees in big apartment buildings. According to the official site of Uryupinsk, there are forty-one street committees and forty-seven house committees in the city. See <http://www.volganet.ru/region/uryup.htm>.
6. Yadviga Yuferova, "Kto ne byl v Uryupinske, tot ne byl v Rossii. . . . Tak schitaet mer goroda Valerii Sushko [interview]," *Rossiiskaya gazeta,* 27 October 2001.
7. Dmitri Petrov, "Uryupinsk kak zerkalo russkoi demokratii" (Uryupinsk as a mirror of Russian democracy), *Russkii Zhurnal,* <http://www.russ.ru/journal/okrest/99-03-12/petrov.htm>.
8. Uryupinsk official site, <http://www.volganet.ru/region/uryup.htm>.
9. See: "Kontseptsiya programmy 'Malye goroda Rossii,'" Open Society Institute, <www.osi.ru>.
10. "Velikaya Uryupinskaya Revolutsiya: Beseda Dmitriya Petorva s Igorem Babichevym," *Russkii Zhurnal,* <http://www.russ.ru/journal/persons/98-11-16/petrov.htm>.
11. Valery Sushko positions himself as an apolitical figure. He, however, is very popular in Uryupinsk; in the local elections in December 2000 Sushko easily took over KPRF candidate Tamara Gornyakova (34.9 percent to 14.75 percent). See *Uryupinskaya Pravda,* 28 December 2000.
12. Yuferova, "Kto ne byl v Uryupinske, tot ne byl v Rossii."
13. Stenogramma mezhdunarodnoi konferentsii po voprosu "Mestnaya demokratiya – osnova demokraticheskoi sistemy: Zakonodatel'nye aspekty usileniya mestnoi demokratii v Rossiiskoi Federatsii," <http://www.yabloko.ru/themes/SG/stenog190601.html>.