

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

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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 40,000 inhabitants enjoy a healthy and picturesque environment on the river Khoper 300 km (about 200 miles) from Volgograd. This old Cossack town is now the center of a rural district. Major industries include the producers of sunflower oil and agricultural machinery, but the city’s authorities hope that the engine for the city’s economy will be goat down. Women there knit shawls that are not only warm, but also very beautiful. City mayor Valery Sushko entertains hopes that Uryupinsk shawls will be real competitors to 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. Uryupinsk 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. 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 managing to solve its problems and develop a civil society without the active participation of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). This unusual case prompts the question of how Uryupinsk has managed such an undertaking when NGOs have often played a key role in the development and sustainment of robust civil societies. Surprisingly, the local cell of the Communist Party of the Russian Federation (KPRF) 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. 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 other

organization is needed, and thus, while there are local KPRF cells, the chance for other organizations to develop and get widespread support is small.

The Communist Party as a Civil Society Organization

Conventional wisdom tends to view contemporary Communists as, first of all, an ideology-driven political organization aimed at regaining control of different levels of power. However, the KPRF in Uryupinsk is not just about that. To be sure, it is still a part of a larger structure of KPRF and helps the KPRF to get its candidates elected to the regional legislature and Russian State Duma. Its major activity, however, lies in the field of local interests. In a provincial Russian city there is no real political struggle. No ideologies, political programs, or even bright candidates are competing at local elections. The KPRF has no competitor organization. Given these factors, what else could be the substance of an organization's everyday activities?

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 did much to bring about the establishment of the first branch of Volgograd State University in Uryupinsk. Mayor Sushko, who the KPRF supported, 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.

Arguing that the Communist Party in Uryupinsk plays a kind of a substitute for those structures called civil society in the West is possible. Why did the Communists in Uryupinsk become a kind of quasi civil-society organization? There are several reasons.

First, the long-time Communist party domination led to the destruction of all the potential rival organizations, including the church, Cossack "krug" (local government), and independent interest groups. Communists did not just destroy those organizations, they appropriated most of their responsibilities. Like the church, the Communist Party regulated the consciences and the 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 even acted as clubs, women's organizations, and educational boards. In Soviet time 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 focuses on what were previously secondary goals.

Second, the Communist Party managed to survive the ideological turbulence of the last decade and positioned itself on the local level as the power defending the interests of the common people. It filled the niche that no other political force was able to fill. Using its nationwide network of local organizations it created not just a political party but a horizontal structure of civil-society organizations. Most of the "zhensovets" (women's councils) are still Communist-dominated, as well as many trade unions, especially in agriculture and related food-processing industries.

The final reason for the continued dominance of the KPRF is the scarcity of resources available in small cities. While inhabitants of large cities have better access to 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.

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 to be responsible for everything. However, this does not mean that such interest is nil, or that it is not represented at all. Uryupinsk is just one of the brightest examples of quasi-civil society existing in the form of local Communist organization.

Recommendations for Civil Society–Building Assistance

At the local level, the Communist Party in Russia is strong not only due to its ideology being 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 real civil society is, and attribute many of its features to their local Communist Party. The effective building of civil society in Russia must deal with that reality. Civil society may be spread in two ways in Russia’s provinces:

- The creation of alternative networks (the way that many western philanthropists like George Soros have chosen).
- Work with the local Communist organizations and local activists in order to encourage their independence from ideological party tycoons.

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

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