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Social workers as agents of change: Russian context of professionalization

At the Joint World Conference on Social Work and Social Development in Hong Kong in 2010 a set of values was formulated that define a mission of social work and the development of social policy. It is supposed that these key values are shared by social work and social policy practitioners, educators, experts are bound around the principles of social justice and empowerment, embracing the levels from individual to global. In the history of this profession there are many examples and even large periods when social workers were aiming and successfully achieving the politically significant changes in social order or periods of decline of activism or decrease of the role of so called structural or political social work. Russian situation in social work is featured by under-professionalization and therefore low degree of professional autonomy, as well as lack of activism frames in social services culture, absence of critical reflection of social work practice, and rigidity of governance. This is a background where the initiatives to change the existing social order can hardly be seen. However, there is some evidence that local initiatives promote transformation of the social work and social policy system. The paper presents the results of the study of participation of Russian social workers in the processes of structural changes. The interviews with social workers were conducted in several Russian regions. Case studies present mechanisms of changes evoked through counteractions and compromises, individual activity or collective action, consolidation with social movements and other agents, through implementing new methods and forms of case work into the system of social services, or through the lobbying legislation changes and practice of institutionalized forms of conflict resolution in courts.

Background

At the very beginning of the 1990-s the Russia' society changed drastically. It became more open and heterogeneous which brought acquisitions to some people and hardships to others. It was a time of big political changes and painful social transformations which were accompanied by a dramatic growth of poverty and unemployment, homelessness and juvenile delinquency, drug and alcohol misuse, mental health issues; HIV/AIDS (Green, 2000; Højdestrand 2003; McAuley 2010; Pridemore 2002; Stephenson 2000; 2008; Titterton 2006).

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Under the conditions of rapid decrease of the level of life during market reforms a number of welfare clients groups increased. It was evident that previous social institutions could not cope with these new social problems. Russia inherited from the Soviet period a complex system of social security based in public institutions, without professional social work and with the small monetary transfers to different social groups (people with disabilities, single mothers, veterans, etc., altogether more than 150 categories of population), which were in addition irregularly paid.

During the 1990s a wide network of social services were established under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Labor and Social Development (recently Ministry of Health Care and Social Development). This social services network has been expanding rapidly during the last 10-12 years. According to the Social Service Federal Law (1995), “the system of social service agencies includes organizations under the control of both Federal and regional authorities, in addition to municipal systems which involve municipal organizations of social services. Social service can also be provided by organizations and citizens representing different sectors of the economy”. By now there are about six thousand organizations with more than 500 thousand employees who provide services for the elderly, people with disabilities, families with children. Most of the services are public agencies designed in a similar way according to an exemplary standing order and regulated by common bureaucratic requirements. During the last ten years, the reform has been gradually taken place: public social services are being converted into semi-autonomous organizations. The idea is to make social services capable of operating in quasi-market, as they will have to work without guaranteed financing and compete for budgeting with other providers. It is supposed that the management will become more flexible, possibility for commercial activity will grow, wages and motivation of workers will increase.

The social welfare sector in Russia covers a variety of agencies, providing direct care and support to service users. The welfare sector of this system in our description can broadly be split into family & children and adult services. Adult services include residential nursing homes, day care, home help, work with people with disabilities, homeless people, job counselling for the unemployed. The main component of family & child services is work with families, which encompasses family care centers, rehabilitation facilities for children with disabilities and for children from families at risk, part time day care facilities, nursing homes for children with learning difficulties. Outreach work with youth delinquents, drug addicts and homeless people is conducted mainly by NGOs, which are active in big cities.

Recent changes in Russian social services of the 2000s include rise of a third sector, a concern with social work professionalization, and the development of the new managerialism (Romanov 2008). The on-going processes of social policy reforms in Russia are determined by

the intentions of neoliberal ideologists and the government to make relationships between the citizens and the state more efficient and effective. Due to ineffectiveness of universalistic approach an emphasis in solving welfare problem was shifted to providing means tested scheme. That has led to a cancellation of a number of welfare clients groups, and to compensating them via monetary means.

However, these changes led to reinforcement of bureaucratic forms of stabilization. There is an ongoing debate whether or not Russia nowadays is a Welfare State, a “Social State” as it was stated in the post-Soviet basic law, Constitution of Russian Federation of 1993 – or rather *laizzes-faire* arrangements. Marginalized individuals, families, groups or communities have not accumulated additional resource as a result of neo-managerialism. Although means-tested assistance was supposed to increase the effectiveness of the social welfare system, it has had negative effects on the most vulnerable population, especially single mothers who are the heads of low-income households. Having engaged in interactions with the social service system in late 1990s-early 2000s, they were often frustrated by the inadequate assistance and impossibility to improve their life situations. Neither clients nor social workers were automatically empowered in a new way. Hard load, which limited initiative of social workers, was not reduced.

Since the beginning of the 1990s, its practice field was developing rather separately from the field of professional training, while the situation in human resources of the social work services sector was characterized by low wages, labor shortage, high fluctuation of personnel and insufficient opportunities of retraining. Flexible working hours provided much opportunity for women to do caring work both in the family and in public services. Added to this, these positions were open while other job chances were scarce: “*There are not very many options to find jobs, no choices*” (Interview with a social worker, 1996) and at risk to be closed down. Such a symbolic contract between women and the state has been legitimised by the ‘National plan of activities concerning the improvement of women’s position in Russia and increasing their role in society up to 2000’ which promotes a ‘creation of additional working places for women by widening the network of social services’ (National Plan, 1996). Our previous research (Iarskaia-Smirnova, Romanov 2008) shows that, by setting up inadequate wage policies for social workers, the state has reinforced the societal assumption of cheap women’s labor as well as the lack of professionalization of social work.

Professional values in social work

Social work ideology includes professional values and beliefs motivating people to act in order to realize these values, but it also goes beyond the framework of profession, being incorporated into relations and discourses around social problems and ways to tackle them. “Social work ideology is anchored in a belief in the welfare state, in the idea that society has not only the right but a moral obligation to intervene in behalf of its most needy and less powerful members, and in the concept that social institutions are responsible for the social needs of the members of the collectivity” (Souflee 1993: 318-319). But it is not only “a consistent set of social, economic and political beliefs” (Mullaly 1997: 31) but rather complex series of relations and discourses that conceal what is really going on in society and that people inhabit in a contradictory, common-sense way (Baines 1999). Social work ideology is an important concept in critical reflection of the professionalization (Chiu & Wong 1998; Fook 2003; Mullaly 1997; Souflee 1993; Woodcock & Dixon 2005). Professional ideologies in Russian social work are shaped and modified by various sources and reflect post-Soviet legitimacy of care and control (Iarskaia-Smirnova 2011). Throughout its short history in Russia, social work has undergone a constant process of change. The actual characteristics of social work education and training are (re)defined by the definition of professionalism, by highly ambivalent relations with the contemporary Russian public policy, by the background of teachers and departments, by a philosophy and ideology of human rights and by the international investments and exchange.

Placing social work ideology in a complex picture of theories, policies, philosophies and myths, it is possible to consider various agents contributing to the constitution of shared knowledge and value base of the profession. In changing societal context this profession may lose its political basis and become less critical (see for instance Chiu & Wong 1998). And just as the welfare state in its historical development has vacillated between the residual and the institutional solutions to social problems, so has the profession isomorphically shifted between individual treatment and social reform (Souflee 1993). Ideology in socialist states combined elements of conservative and social democratic value systems, and while the early Soviet political rhetoric appealed to the values of self-government and equality, then the shift was made towards paternalism and totalitarianism. It was reflected in changes of understanding of social problems, their causes and ways of tackling them, reforming social support and service provision. In today’s Russia the principles of neo-managerialism in social work are infused by the ideologies of neo-liberal welfare state. Intervention of market ideology (or ‘businessology’) in ‘caring’ domain of social services (Harris, 2003) does not solve old but rather add new dilemmas, problems and contradictions. Dividing the poor as deserving and undeserving turned

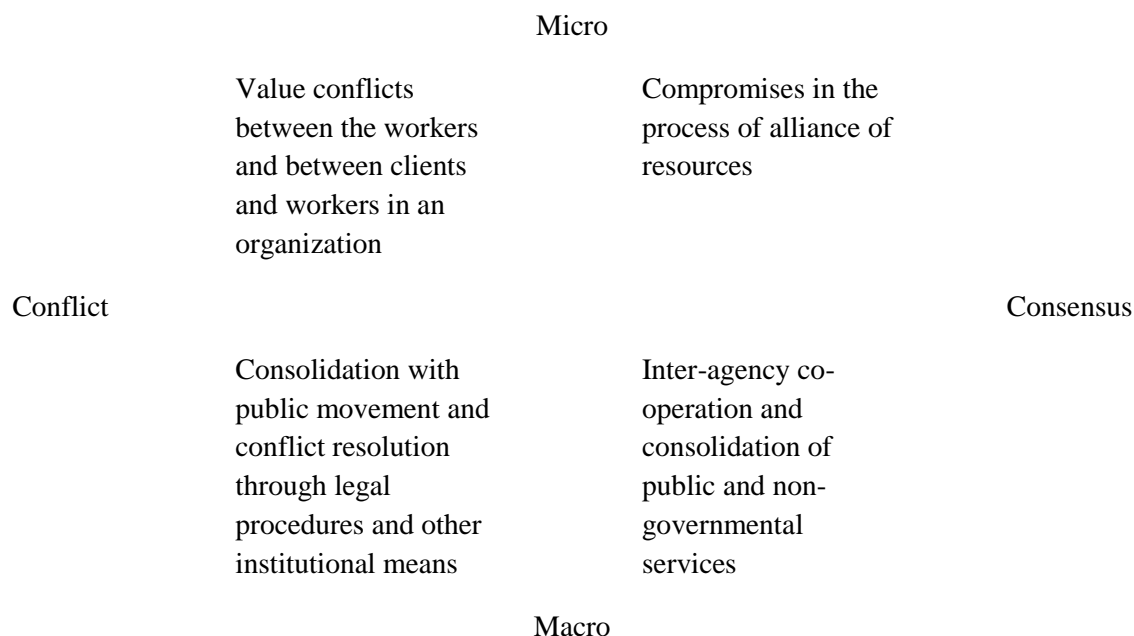
out to be very useful to scientifically rationalise the allocation of resources. By saving resources, ideologies of governmentality create a gap between clients and social workers.

Case studies

The ongoing research project has started in July 2010 when we sent to the university departments of social work a call for prospective participants to collect descriptions of such cases that would be related to the involvement of social workers into the formulation of new rules and principles of work in an organization, local community, in the region or on the national level, which can positively affect well-being of groups of population. The main question we had in mind was “What structural changes in Russian social policy it is possible to implement bottom-up, from below, through the initiatives of social workers, and how these initiatives are structured by the local conditions?” We have collected a dozen of descriptions mainly related to the changes in well-being of individuals and families, to the individual level of efforts and corresponding effects, several cases presented structural changes and a few others were focused on the formal institutional mechanisms designed to promote changes. The materials exemplify situation in eight big Russian regions: Kazan, Krasnodar, Moscow, Petrozavodsk, Saratov, Saint-Petersburg, Tomsk, Volgograd. The collected cases present more or less successful initiatives with different effects promoted by the actions of the parents of children with disabilities with the support of social workers and public officials, charities, university teachers or researchers and other agents. In some cases the changes were conducted peacefully, in others the conflicts have taken place that catalyzed or hindered changes. Sustainability of changes induced during the projects sometimes is questioned after the financing is ended.

The main agents of change in collected cases were specialists of public services and non-governmental organizations, public officials from departments of social security and education, researchers and university teachers, parents of children with disabilities and other citizens who can be the catalysts of change. The majority of cases are related to the workers of public services. Some specialists of non-governmental organizations identify themselves as social workers, they render services to the client, some of them collaborate with or even integrate themselves into the public services, while several distant themselves from this occupational group due to their regular institutional conflicts with social services: “*Social workers only interfere when we try to promote changes*” (a specialist of non-governmental service for children with complex disability).

The strategies were aimed on legal, institutional and societal changes, and they can be grouped in the following types: mobilization of collective action, consolidation of agents and alliance of resources, introduction of new technologies of case work, and institutionalized conflict (see pict.1).



Pict. 1. Strategies implementation of social changes by social workers

New technologies in social services constitute a new focus in social service policy, a part of the Russian establishment policy general concern with innovations. Examples of new technologies include methods that often are adopted from international co-operation: “net of social contacts, mobilization of resources of social environment of a family”; “intensive family therapy at home”; “active support of parents”, etc. (Volgograd, StPetersburg, Saratov). Usually, these changes are rooted in eco-systemic models of social work, and they often affect organizational modification in social services and are induced by changes in ideology.

Consolidation of agents and alliance of resources are the most accessible forms of realization of changes. Sometimes, specialists discover gaps in their own authority or in the system arrangements, which hinder their capabilities to help a client, to solve a problem, and appeal to ombudsman or begin to advocate, calling attention of mass media, public officials and members of local parliaments, succeeding to integrate several fragments of social services system, for

instance, through making a special contract between the center of social services and medical-social expertise in order to improve mechanisms of individual rehabilitation program.

Sustainability here is secured due to update of work regulations and regularity of collaboration between different specialists and agencies. Inter-agency collaboration is a very important and often successful part of social service policy in Russia. Sometimes such innovations cause significant changes in legal base and infrastructure of social services, for example in Perm, Tomsk and other regions, which are famous because of their reforms in social sphere.

In some cases, an individual service user can be a catalyst of changes, for example, a mother of a child with severe disability in Saratov has motivated specialists of rehabilitation center to establish a club for kids with special needs. They have attracted charity and political resources, as a result, several clubs for children and young people with disabilities were established in the city.

Not all of these initiatives were successful. Many projects were not realized or ceased to exist due to a lack of resources or due to the destructive conflicts.

Mobilization of collective action is a strategy used by civic groups, charities, NGOs. Parents of children with disabilities often become such an engine of change when they collaborate with active non-governmental organizations, public services and officials.

Institutional forms of conflict are the strategy of non-governmental organizations collecting information about the violation of legislation, of human rights, making official claims and initiating negative sanctions against the violators. For instance, in Moscow in 2006 a NGO “Center for Curative Pedagogics” has initiated court procedure concerning the rejection of social security department to provide possibility for parents of children with disabilities to identify and use proper services for children. Another NGO, Perspectiva in 2008 has successfully proceed in a court a case concerning the rejection of airline Siberia to let a person in a wheelchair on board.

In the next chapter of this paper we will focus on one case in more details.

Inclusive education in Petrozavodsk: a case of institutional conflict

In Russia today children with disabilities are entitled to receive education services in regular schools or special institutions. The psychological-medical-pedagogical commissions have the power to identify a type of educational setting for a child with disability. The system of education in Russia undergoes deep changes and the schools experience transformation being

influenced by governmental reforms and market economy but a lot of barriers still persist against inclusive education (see: Iarskaia-Smirnova, Romanov, 2007). Social workers in Russia are not very often involved into human rights movement and promotion of a new legislation. Collaboration between the employees of social services with social movements and other public agencies can bring the initiative to the level of structural changes that are aimed to improve well-being of large groups of people.

Such an exceptional example was presented by Svetlana Driakhlitsyna from the city of Petrozavodsk, capital of a Republic of Karelia situated In the West-North of Russia, near the Russian-Finnish border. She has been working as a social worker of a public agency and at the same time as a leader of the Association of non-governmental organizations of people with disabilities of Karelia. In 2004 she has supported a court suit of a group of parents who claimed pre-school places for their children with disabilities. Prior to that the parents have made several unsuccessful attempts to find facilities for their children in kindergartens appealing to the city administration. The city court did not satisfy the claim referring to explanation of the city department of education, due to lack of funds to provide accessible facilities.

After a while, when the Supreme court of Republic of Karelia did not change that decision, the parents have arranged for a press-conference in a special library for visually impaired. They came to the meeting with journalists together with their children, members of association of people with disabilities and several active social workers, including Svetlana. The news about violation of children's rights were broadcasted on all local TV and published in local newspapers. Rather soon, the case was requested into the Supreme Court of Republic for a supervisory process, and the suit was satisfied in 2006. Some funds were made available through the European project Tacis to pay the lawyer. By then, children were already seven years old and it was too late for them to go to a pre-school (they were admitted to a special school for children with profound disabilities).

Besides, the decision was not made concerning the institution to be charged and to be responsible for the changes – city or republican authority, education or social security should provide services for such children. Thus, a similar case occurred in June 2006, when another two parents of children with disabilities have attempted to include their children into the pre-school services. The situation has been repeated but the parents were more prepared this time, and again, non-governmental organization and social workers from several agencies have spoken in court and supported the suitors. The suited parties – city administration, Ministry of finances, Ministry of education of Karelia – all insisted the lack of their jurisdiction. However, this time rather quickly, in December 2006, the court decision was to oblige city administration

to establish special facilities in regular pre-school setting in collaboration with the Government and Ministry of Education of the Republic.

Further collaboration between the parents' movement, non-governmental organizations and social workers has led to the next structural changes. In one year, in January 2008, the new legislation has been passed – the Law of Republic of Karelia of 23.01.2008 N 1168 “About introducing changes in some legal acts of Republic of Karelia concerning the provision of social support and social service for children with complex disability who cannot serve themselves” (Political life of North-West, 2008) According to this law, children with disabilities who are enrolled into kindergarten or school, are entitled to have a personal assistant with salary and to receive 1880 Roubles (~77 USD) monthly compensation for transportation. Besides, educational institutions that render inclusive services are to be provided by additional budget to develop accessible environment.

During the realization of this new law several issues became apparent, including the low salary of personal assistant and uncertainty of his/her tasks, slow reconstruction of facilities, etc. But it became clear that the alliance between social workers and the public can promote the important changes of political level. Participation in this activity has led to a change in Svetlana's job situation. Having experienced a pressure from the administration, she has left public social service. She is still working as a chairperson of the Association of non-governmental organizations of people with disabilities of Karelia, and contributed in 2011 to a elaboration and promotion of a proposal of a new legislation “On providing access for people with disabilities and other low-mobile citizens to the public buildings and transportation”, which is now under consideration in the government (Tsygankov 2011). This proposal is elaborated in the perspective of universal design.

Institutional conditions limit the initiative and field of possibilities of the employees of social services. According to Svetlana,

“Mostly, possibilities to achieve certain changes are possessed by the managers of social services or their deputies. The specialist in social work has no tools for her own action. From very beginning, they had to perform functional duties, and <...> their own initiative is not motivated, rather, it belongs to those who makes a decision” (interview with Svetlana Driakhlitsyna)

In this case, there were several factors that contributed to the success of social worker's endeavor. Being involved into international exchange programs, further qualification programs, Svetlana and some other social workers recognized and interiorized professional values of social

work. A social worker on a position of management, she increased her autonomy and capabilities to promote and maintain the changes that are justified by the system. Svetlana was inclined to professional reflection and civic activism – she has long experience of combining work in a public service with civic activity. In 2009 she has defended a thesis in sociology of disability at StPetersburg State University. Geographical proximity of Karelia to Northern Europe, to Scandinavia, increases opportunities for international collaboration, for finding various resources and support.

Conclusion

Contemporary situation in social work in Russia is featured by under-professionalization and therefore low degree of professional autonomy, as well as lack of activism frames in social services culture, absence of critical reflection of social work practice, and rigidity of governance. This is a background where the initiatives to change the existing social order can hardly be seen. However, recently there is some evidence that local initiatives can initiate transformation of the social work and social policy system. Social workers initiate positive changes through counter-actions and compromises, individual activity or collective action, consolidation with social movements and other agents, through implementing fundamentally new methods of case work into the system of social services, or through the practice of institutionalized forms of conflict resolution.

Non-governmental organizations offering social services to the population succeeded quite well in accumulating their human resources. Due to their flexible organizational structure, strong motivation and high qualification of their leaders and employees, many NGOs working with orphans, people with disabilities, survivors of domestic violence and other vulnerable groups of the population have developed professional skills, are involved in international co-operation and in many cases collaborate with local government, social services and universities. Having grown out of the service users' associations and grass-roots movements, these NGOs use emancipatory and egalitarian ideology in their struggle to establish human rights and principles of independent living. NGOs located in big cities and funded by international and national foundations can provide an attractive labor market for qualified social work graduates as they offer better wages, encourage and support employees to improve professionally, operate on project-management base, which often is associated with a flexible and vivid organizational culture. However, the number of such organizations is rather limited and unstable due to the specific economic and political situation in Russia, where big involvement of foreign donors is

not encouraged while national funds to support non-governmental activities are scarce. Besides, some big international donors and non-governmental organizations, which were previously very active in Russia are decreasing their presence here.

Social workers are gradually acquiring new knowledge and skills to effect social change in democratic egalitarian mode rather than following the paternalist scheme of thought and action. However, yet this is rather an exception than usual practice. As we can see, capabilities to promoting social initiatives vary at different levels of organizational hierarchy, while the professional autonomy of specialists is very limited. Several cases in our research exemplify such exceptions when the initiatives of social workers have led to the structural changes. These initiatives have been realized apart of such institutional channels as socio-cultural projects and contests that have been established by the system to stimulate and accumulate such kind of experience.

It is important for government, foundations and the academic community to focus more on critical issues in social welfare and on the importance of developing conflict resolution skills and to support the development of social services research. Democratic egalitarian and non-discriminatory ideology is required in social services as well as in social work training. It is worthwhile to pay more attention to retraining programs and to raise the level of skills of specialists who already work for social service agencies. University education in social work can have impact on the enhancement of professional identity of social work in frames of critical social thinking with focus on social justice and human rights. The impact of international co-operation on the enhancement of professional identity of social work is a good contribution to the development of structural social work.

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