Civic initiatives: Soldiers' Mothers Movement in Russia

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The influences of globalization on the Russian situation are usually discussed only in economic and political terms. The economic backwardness of Russia is widely discussed as well as the breakdown of its political status after the end of the Cold War. Global civil society however can be treated in another way – as transnational non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that are interested in the establishing of a world order based on human rights principles. Social practices relevant to human rights should be introduced and developed by the Russian population. Soldiers' Mothers Organization (SMO), which is the object of my research, uses the resources of the transnational peace and human rights organization to establish itself in the inhospitable political and cultural context of Russia.

I am not sure that the term global civil society is appropriate as it includes a lot of different, even contradictory meanings. In certain frameworks it will mean globalization of markets, which often presume pauperization of the poor and empowerment of the powerful. I would prefer to speak about just one dimension of the complicated phenomenon – about globalization of human rights principles and corresponding social practices. I consider human rights NGOs to be such structures that aim at the development of the human rights culture, that is the civic culture based on the rule of law and on the democratic habitus. Human Rights NGOs try to exercise social practices relevant for the human rights' culture and develop their own strategies aimed at the development of these practices among Russian citizens. To mobilize Russian citizens for human rights activities they often develop frameworks that combine human rights ideology with elements of traditional values, and beliefs (religious) that seem to be prevalent in the population. Thus Soldiers' Mothers Organization in St. Petersburg for instance, bases its ideology on human rights principles as well as on the pacifist Orthodox ideology and on the traditional concept of responsible motherhood.

In this paper the interviews carried out by the author, A. Temkina, G. Ermitcheva were used. Also, the manuscript of E. Zhabokrya "Women Organizations in St. Petersburg" was very helpful in the work on this text.
Perestroika and formation of the Soldiers' Mothers Organizations (SMOs)

The Soldiers' Mothers Movement, along with other independent initiatives, developed in Russia due to political opportunities emerging through glasnost in the course of the reforms of perestroika (1985-1991). The first SMOs were formed in late 1989, at the peak of democratic mobilization of perestroika when, as a part of the discourse of glasnost, the violation of law in the Soviet Army came to the fore. Before that the Soviet Army was a closed institution, which was impenetrable to all forms of civic observation and control. Indeed, little reliable information percolated into the mass media. However, the information circulated in informal networks. People mostly found out about the violation of law and human rights in the Army from the personal experiences of families whose sons went through military service and from everyday private discussion.

The Russian Army has always been “the state within the state” in both Soviet and post-Soviet times. Hence the institution has developed its own culture in which rites and rules of the game differ from those of civic society. This culture was sustainable and resistant to change even when Russian society began to undergo rapid economic and political change. The leader of the Soldiers’ Mothers Organization in St. Petersburg observed the situation in the Russian Army in 1994, “the society is changing and developing the culture of human rights and democratic values, while the Army is still behind, it is still a totalitarian institution”.

However, with the liberal reforms of perestroika the situation started to change. After ideological demilitarization was initiated by Gorbachev with its emphasis on human values (1986-87), the withdrawal of Soviet troops from Afghanistan (1989), and the open declaration by the Soviet authorities of the political adventurousness of the Afghan War, the state of affairs in the Soviet Army started to be discussed in public. The mass media was especially influential in the process of opening the discourse on the Army.

One tragic event gave impetus to this discussion. In February 1987, in Leningrad (St. Petersburg) a soldier was arrested and accused of shooting three of his superiors and deserting. Later he was examined by medical experts and put into a mental hospital. The legal case was broadly discussed in the mass media: local TV and radio news, as well as newspapers, scrupulously commented the course of the trial. It soon emerged that the military had attempted to conceal the real content of the case. The authentic version of the story developed in the following way. Arturas Sakulauskas (the name of the deserter) and the three other soldiers were escorting a train transfer. On the way Sakulauskas had been continuously tortured by the three service men and sexually abused. As a result he shot them in self-defense. The investigation of this particular case unearthed evidence proving that the abuse and insulting of junior soldiers by elder ones was common practice in the Soviet Army. It was commonly known as dedovshchina. Thus, exposed dedovshchina became the object of public criticisms.

The mass media launched the campaign unmasking the Soviet army practices. At the time the Soviet Army was criticized on three issues: (1) dedovshchina; (2) the violation of the Law on Military Duty on behalf of the military during the annual drafts; (3) the use of the military Code in the cases that were not relevant for this. In this public discussion dedovshchina became a specific target of criticism. Dedovshchina, as a systemic feature of the Soviet Army culture, can be defined as the set of informal practices of personal interaction performed in by collective of servicemen, and characterized by discrimination against first year servicemen (salagi) by senior servicemen (dedy, stariki) (humiliation, harassment and abuse). In bureaucratic language these practices are called - outside-of-Statute relations - which means that the Statute of military service does not regulate them.

Dedovshchina for many years was considered to be an inevitable part of the internal ethos of the military service in the Soviet Army, which served as the initiating ritual, necessary for the achievement of true manhood (masculinity). When it became publicly evident that such ethos in its extreme brings young men to suicide, mental diseases, crime and disablement, the protest against such masculine military culture began to grow in public.

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4 Dedovshchina can be conceived as representative of the sanctification in the everyday life of the entire institution of the Soviet Army. A brief account of the etymology will clarify the form. The general noun dedovshchina is derivative from the noun “ded” - translated into English as “grandfather”; Ded (or starik - the elder) is the jargon label for a soldier of the 2nd-3d years of the military service.
example, the Soldiers’ Mothers Organization of St. Petersburg was founded in the fall of 1991.

Soldiers’ mothers and the Chechen wars

The beginning of the first Chechen War (December, 1994) resulted in the mobilization of the Soldiers’ Mothers Movement all over Russia. Dozens of new organizations were registered. New aspects of the protest agenda were formulated; and new forms of collective action were practiced.

The public anti-military protest had not been comprehensive at all. Only three factions of the Duma (Low House of the Parliament) protested against the first Chechen War (“the Choice of Russia”, the Russian Communist Party and “the Women of Russia”). This anti-war lobby, which worked mainly in the Parliament, was unsuccessful. In the streets only Communists and the Soldiers’ Mothers protested against the war in Chechnya. The second Chechen War did not mobilize anti-military sentiments at all.

In the course of the Chechen Wars the Russian military faced new problems and the cases of those refusing to undertake their military service in Chechnya increased. However, these refusals were in the main, not public - young men tried to escape from the military duties using private channels. Dismissal and exemption from the Army conditioned by this refusal also became more frequent.

The military committees in the regions of Russia did not implement enlistment. However, instead of the reforming of the Army the Ministry of Defense was oriented towards the introduction of the more rigid version of the Law on Military Duty, which at that time was discussed in the Duma and in the mass media. The amendments, which allowed suspending military service, were questioned. All these issues became the agenda of the protest movement. The groups started networking, coordination and joint actions of the SMOs from different cities of Russia took place. They organized workshops, conferences and seminars and the attention of mass media was growing. Simultaneously radicalization of the movement was taking place whilst pacifism became the prevailing ideology in the movement. Their slogans included anti-regime demands and the repertoire of protest expanded including picketing, demonstrations and peace marches on the territory of

In the course of the debate the idea of civic control of the military service in order to guarantee the ‘normal’ functioning of the Army collectives was formulated. It was during this discourse that the first SMO appeared. The case of Sakalauskas became the starting point for the women’s (mothers’) mobilization against the violation of human rights in the Soviet Army. In 1989 a Soldiers’ Mothers’ Committee was formed in St. Petersburg, as well as in other large Russian towns (Moscow, Tver, Samara, etc.). The membership of such groups was composed mainly of parents and relatives of the servicemen (mothers were especially active).

The goals of the committees were “to defend the rights of those due to be conscripted into the military, of the military servicemen and the members of their families” (from the statute of the SMO). Following these aims, the committees established regular contacts with the military departments, where young men were serving, in order to control the way in which their military service was going. They worked hand by hand with military committees and high military officials at local level. Sometimes the offices of the SMOs were located in the military headquarters of the city. Thus according to the opinion of many observers, these organizations became “pocket structures” of the regional military committees, being dependent on them, and not radical in their demands.

Since the late 1980s the Soviet Army was widely deployed in the internal political conflicts in the USSR and later in Russia (Georgia, Lithuania, Ossetia etc.), and the Soldiers’ Mothers Committees began to undergo rapid changes. An organizational split occurred within the recently established civic initiatives: some groups remained the “right hand” of the military, others started independent anti-Army collective action campaigns and formed new independent organizations with disruptive strategies, demanding radical military reform. Until reforms in the Army are carried out, they argued, they would prevent their sons from going into military service.

The argument of radical part of the movement is expressed below: “You cannot influence and control the military, when you work in one team with them. It is necessary to oppose them openly, declaring the ideology of human rights and defense of your sons. We, ourselves, have to save our future - our sons - from the war and the military... First we worked as one with the human rights’ organizations, which cooperated with all branches of power. But later we realized, that we have to be leaders not assistants to authorities.” (Interview with Ella Polyakova, March 8, 1994). Thus, for
the military conflict. International contacts were established, at that moment the movement was the only vocal antiwar protest in Russia.

There are two periods in the year, when SMOs evoke mobilization - the time of the spring and autumn drafts. In these periods young men of conscription age, and their relatives, come to SMOs to discuss their problems and find appropriate solutions. Currently the agenda of the organization includes basic human rights protection and free legal consultation during the draft-periods, and during the course of military service.

Idea and symbolism

The ideology of the Soldiers Mothers' Organizations is the conjuncture of two powerful conceptions. One of them is the concept of human rights. Another one is the concept of Responsible Sacred Motherhood (the core belief of the essentialist Russian gender culture). Motherhood, framed as the biologically determined destiny of women, prescribes the main responsibility for life per se to women. Both concepts are expressed in the self-presentation of the SMOs: in the self-naming of organizations, their emblems, discourse of the introductory speech given by the leaders to the visitors and in the symbolism of the places where the SMOs work and hold sessions. Let's again take the example of the SMO of St.Petersburg.

The text of the introductory speech contains multiple references to the liberal ideology of human rights with its focus on individual responsibility and necessary legal education. Extracts from the introductory speech to the general consultation are given below, the leader starts the session with introducing the SMO:

"We are a human rights' protection organization, not a committee. Our general aim is to promote the formation of a civil society and law-ruled state in Russia. We came here to work together. We are not just going to do things for you. It is your personal responsibility - responsibility of your family. You have to help yourself to defend your inalienable rights. Do you know what rights can be called inalienable? They are: the right to live, to be healthy and to be protected by law. You can read it in the Declaration of Human Rights, which is signed by Russia, and in the Constitution of the Russian Federation. You have to follow the Law. The authorities are fakes, they are not going to defend your rights. Thus you have to defend them yourself. If you do not defend your rights yourself - you have to become criminals. If you violate the Constitution yourself... You have to know the meaning of the pro-life slogans can be in different political and cultural contexts.

Law and defend your civic rights against those who want to violate them - authorities, especially military authorities. They can cheat ignorant people, and threaten them, and blackmail them. We teach you to use the Law against officials, who do not want you to follow it. It is difficult, but you will learn." (From the tape of the consultation, January 7, 1994).

In the SMO the procedure of legal human rights' protection is developed. The voluntary instructors explain the technique to each visitor. "It is the same tactics, that dissidents had elaborated and used in their activities during Soviet totalitarianism", observed the leader of the St. Petersburg SMO Ella Polyakova (interview, March 8, 1994).

The symbolism of the SMO signifies the standpoint of its adherents. The naming of the organization gives a key to the basic concept of motherhood. Thus one of the respondents observed: "Such a name (The Soldiers' Mothers organization) is meaningful for people. It sounds better than any other, and it is the basic truth - mothers are responsible for their sons and for life in general".

In the case of the St. Petersburg SMO, religious (Christian) justification has common ground with the combination of human rights' ideology and the essentialist interpretation of motherhood. The St. Petersburg SMO is a religious organization, though it is difficult to say which denomination it belongs to - the constituency includes adherents of different Churches and also atheists. However, the two rooms and hall, which the organization rented in the House of the Democratic Russia for six years, were consecrated by the priests of four denominations: Lutheran, Catholic, Orthodox, and American Protestant in 1993. The members of the SMO claim that their efforts became more efficient after consecration, as God's Mother patronized them.

The decoration of the place is saturated by religious symbolism. Candles burn in the room where the consultations and training of parents and future soldiers take place. The walls are decorated with pictures of icons of God's Mother (Kazan's icon of the God's Mother, which is very popular in Russia) and the texts of prayers and poetry, Mother's prayer and The Cry of the
Mother. In the organization a praying group was formed, which holds the common prayer before work starts. Visitors are asked to join the common prayer after the end of the consultation.

The emblem of the St. Petersburg SMO can be described as a female hand holding a burning candle depicted in a circle. From the center sunrays are spreading, forming a cross. According to the interpretation of the leader, “the ideology of the organization is expressed in this symbolism - we want to save the life (of humankind, the Russian population and the lives of our sons). The symbol also has religious meaning - you see the sun-rays in the form of a cross as the reminiscence of Christianity”. The strong belief in the integrity of the values of Christianity, human rights and motherhood is typical for the St. Petersburg SMO.

Activities

There are various collective activities undertaken by the SMOs; consulting, collection of evidence for human rights violations, picketing, conferences, work with the mass media, work in the Public Hall with other NGOs, participation in electoral campaigns, mass marches, attempts at hunger strikes and trials with the military. Institutional and non-institutional collective actions are combined. The form and the scale of protest action has been determined by the political context. Thus before the Chechen War the actions were located in the capital or in the regional towns where the SMO were registered as voluntary or human rights organizations - they were mainly picketing, petitions, alternative legal consulting and trials. Later, the Chechen war inspired peace marches to the region of the conflict and growth of the number of petitions addressed to the international community. Now NGO activities are primarily alternative legal and medical consulting, work with the mass media, and human rights protection schools.

The most important practice of the SMOs is alternative legal consulting and, so called, schools of law. Participant observation of these activities in the St. Petersburg SMO made it possible to analyze both content and symbolism. Alternative juridical consultations in St. Petersburg SMO were the main form of activity until the late 1990s, more recently Schools of Law substituted these consulting activities. According to the leader of SMO, this change in SMO action was caused by the fact that free legal consulting was treated by the addressees as charity, and did not develop their civic culture.

Legal consulting, which until recently was the core activities of the SMO, was called a session. The session combined the features of collective prayer and consulting. Three times a week for two hours general consultation was given to everyone present (100-150) people present at each session, their numbers growing during draft periods. Help, in the form of reliable information and teaching procedure, was provided to young people (and their relatives), who are subject to military service, who experienced violence in the Army, or strive for independent investigation, and search for reliable independent advocates and physicians. The organization recommends a list of independent medical doctors and lawyers. It also publishes booklets with evidence of human rights violations in Russia and juridical information.

The session was rigidly structured. It included the introductory talk, the individual consulting of visitors and a common prayer. In the introductory talk the raison d'être of the SMO is given. In the course of consultation legal ways to examine whether a youth is subject to the Military Duty are given. Experts explain that the family is the main agent for the human rights defense of the youth. In the cases when a young man of conscription age appears to be alone, the organization takes on the responsibility of representing his interests. When during the drafts or in the course of military service, violation of law happens on the part of the military, the strong claim of the organization is that parents have to initiate the law case. “Trials, trial, and trials - this is what we need with the military. We will teach the officials to follow the laws” - observed a member of the SMO.

The St. Petersburg SMO ran two important legal cases against the office of the city military prosecutor and against the St. Petersburg military committee. The first case was initiated by the SMO after the military prosecutor accused the activists in public of concealing deserters. In response the SMO brought an action against it for insulting the integrity of the organization. The second suit against the military committee was for its refusal to provide alternative civil service for those who cannot go through the military service because of their beliefs.

10 According to the Russian Law on Military Duty there are three occasions, when the military service can be suspended or canceled: poor health, family situation (i.e. when a young man is the only breadwinner for an elderly single parent, who is a pensioner, a father with the child under 1 years old), and ideological argument, when military service do not correspond to the world-view of the young man (a right for alternative service is declared in the Constitution but there is no relevant Law). Students also have the right to a postponement of military service.
During the First Chechen war the SMO arranged anti-military rallies and picketing in the centre of St. Petersburg. These demonstrations were, however, quite small, with few people joining the protest action. Russian SMOs organized visits of mothers to the Russian troops in Chechnya, they demanded that deserters of this war wouldn't be subjected to a military tribunal. They wrote anti-war appeals to international peace organizations, exposing the violation of rights in Chechnya and in the Russian Army in general. The most high profile collective action initiated by the SMO took place in March 1995.

The march of peace and compassion to Chechnya

This was the March of Peace and Compassion to Chechnya. Representatives of SMOs from about 15 cities participated and about 300 women completed the March. The leader was Maria Kirbasova, the head of the Moscow SMO. The purpose of the March was both symbolic and instrumental: it aimed to demonstrate anti-war attitudes, to collect reliable information about those killed and injured, and finally to stop the war in Chechnya. The intention was to put white handkerchiefs between the Russian and Chechen troops. According to the tradition of Chechen people, if a woman manages to put a white handkerchief between the fighters, they should stop their struggle. However, the Russian military authorities stopped the march at one of the check-points, arguing that such an action was not safe. The participants still maintained, that “the March did not fail. We demonstrated our will and determinacy of our peaceful initiatives” (interview with Ella Polyakova).

After the March women gave information about events in Chechnya to the mass media. The reality of war had been seen; ruined towns, deprived and frustrated Russian and Chechen soldiers, hospitals and camps for the captives, thus the women’s pacifist conviction were reinforced. The slogans of the March claimed that ‘the responsibility for bloodshed in Chechnya lies on every Russian person, who did not blame the war’. The participants spoke openly about “the feeling of guilt in relation to the people of Chechnya”, etc. The constant conflict between the SMO and the authorities became even stronger exemplified e.g. by the fact that local military persecutors searched offices of the SMOs in Murmansk and St. Petersburg in order to find the deserters and blamed them for concealing the deserters. The organizations, however, continued their work, using the new opportunities for networking. They initiated the chain of training workshops, which gathered women from local SMOs. The technique of these workshops resembles that of the conscious raising groups of the feminist movement in the 1970s.

Since 1994 the training workshops of the soldiers’ mothers organizations are organized regularly. They are supported financially by the foreign Foundations and took place in Murmansk, Arkhangelsk, Syktyvkar, etc.

Resources of the organization

**Participation.** The research in the St. Petersburg SMO shows that the overwhelming majority of the visitors/adherents to the SMO belong to the “lower social class”. People appeal for the help of the organization because they are poor, ignorant in the legal sphere, and don’t have the resources necessary to solve their problems in private (money, and connections). Their low status may be the main reason why these people are exposed to abuse on the part of military authorities, whose main aim is to recruit the right number of soldiers, with little regard to their rights and conditions. The poor are threatened and blackmailed, as they often do not realize their rights and opportunities. People in need of free legal help and consulting, address the SMO and participate in its activities. Most of them leave the organization when they find a solution to their problem; some of them stay as volunteers. The problem of the free-rider is well-known to the activists and volunteers.

One of the leaders observed with regret: “many come here just to use us. They demand from us, they think that it is our duty to provide them with resources. They feel offended if we do not work for them in the way old Communist Party organizations did. They have no idea either of voluntary work, or of the self-help principle. They want things to be done for them; they like to be cosseted. They just use us and leave”.

Volunteers form the constituency of SMOs. The leader of the St.Peterburg SMO Ella Polyakova said at the introductory session: “Every person who comes here more than once is a member of our organization. He/she can

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11 In the everyday practices people try escape the dangers of the military service by getting (buying) the medical certificate, finding the safe place for the military services. For example, the average price of the medical certificate that guarantee exemption from military service cost in the 1994-1997 from $1000 to $2000 depending on the region of the country and the agents of the deal.

12 Interview with Elena Vileneiskaya, an activist in St. Petersburg, April, 1994.
exchange experience with others”. The volunteers are men and women, people of different generations who are often family members. Though the name is “The Soldiers’ Mothers Organization”, not only parents but young men of conscription age work as volunteers. However, the majority are parents, whose sons experienced the violation of human rights or other problems in conscription periods or in military service - they have a personal attachment to the problem of human rights violations in the Russian Army.

Not only those personally interested in human rights protection in the Army work in the SMO. The leader of the St.Petersburg organization - Ella Polyakova has a mainly ideological motive for activism. Ella has experience in the work of other human rights and democratic organizations.

**Finances.** The cost of membership subscriptions in the St. Petersburg SMO is not fixed. The members contribute as much as they can. Donations from visitors are approved. The SOROS foundation has also helped the SMO by providing a computer and a photocopying machine. The EC programs - Phare and Tacis Democracy, provide financial support for the organization of conferences and workshops. However, the lack of financial resources has always been a problem for the organization.

**Conclusion**

The almost 10 year history of the Soldiers’ Mothers Movement in Russia signifies an emerging civil society. Its mobilization potential is based on the ideology of human rights, essentialist interpretation of motherhood and loose Christian beliefs. Permanent problems, which are on the agenda for this movement are, the slowing down of Army reforms; failures in domestic and foreign policies and the avoidance of military service by young men. During the period of Russian transformation the Army has been enlisted to solve political conflicts and soldiers and junior officers often become the hostages of higher political and military authorities. The agenda for the movement is mediated by the military conflicts on the territory of the Russian Federation as well as by the practices of social interaction in the Russian Armed forces. This means that peaceful initiatives of the Soldiers’ Mothers will be sustainable features in the landscape of the emerging civil and civic society in Russia.

The analysis of SMO shows that their resources are highly dependent on international contacts. Internal organization and the financial support, which they get from political parties and civic organization, is insufficient. Local authorities do not support this NGO, although they cannot be blamed for repressing it.

**References**


Summary

Politics of Civil Society:
A Global Perspective on Democratisation

In the wake of the third wave of democratisation, civil society has become a catchword repeated in numerous official speeches and documents. This book challenges many of the standard Western assumptions about civil society and its role in democratisation.

Politics of Civil Society argues for a comparative and global perspective of understanding how civil societies develop; for grasping the connections between these developments; and for understanding the implications of globalisation. The book asks: what is positive about civil society, including the so called "global civil society"? In what sense is civil society conducive to democratisation in different parts of the world? What are the positive possibilities? What are limits, setbacks and problems?

The context for all discussions is globalisation. Given the time/space compression, what are the links between various episodes, tendencies and developments in different parts of the world? To what extent are also relevant power relations globalising? To what extent is democracy following suit? Is it possible to see movements towards trans- and supranational democracy; and attempts to transnationalise political civic actions?

Politics of Civil Society concludes with an assessment of global democratisation. There are a number of tendencies and social forces that are causally efficacious all over the globe. Liberal-democratisation of states is coupled with a widespread tendency towards depoliticisation of issues and delimitation of the area of democratic self-determination.

In the context of unequal economic developments and rapidly growing global disparities, with the emergence of new interdependencies, this has led not only to extensive apathy and indifference but also to attempts to relocate democratic politics. In many of the consequent struggles, cosmopolitan democracy has come into sight as a vision for a not-so-distant future.