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# Civil society in Russia:

## Rural clubs and a *new popular education*

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### Introduction

A civil society is fundamental to a democracy. It provides a framework for citizenship participation autonomous of state authority and control. It creates conditions through which citizens, associations, societies and other group interests achieve a voluntary, legal and harmonious but not subservient relationship with the state. The countries that comprised the Soviet Union emerged from the control of a political system which regarded civil society as a challenge to its authority.

This article introduces a fresh dimension in the concept of a *new popular education* as a response to social change and the re-emergence of civil society in post-Soviet Russia. The term is derived from *narodnoe obrazovanie* or *popular education* which was used commonly in Russia from the 1920s until at least the 1960s. We have coined the term *novoe narodnoe obrazovanie* or *new popular education* to describe current practice. The article discusses the potential it has for social and human capital formation, for shaping civil society, and for developing active and responsible citizens. However, the concepts of adult and non-formal education, and of informal and lifelong-learning, on which the *new popular education* is based, have undergone significant changes in recent years. They evolve as fresh groups of people discover new educational objectives, and as new methods of participation become available.<sup>1</sup> The context in which education and learning take place is crucial to form and to content. This article examines a specific aspect of the growth of civil society in the Russian Federation since the end of the Soviet Union. It focuses on the practice of a *new popular education* as provided by

autonomous clubs and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in rural Russia.<sup>2</sup>

### A new popular education?

All states have formal education systems which are significant examples of economic and social modernisation. Such formal education systems are agencies through which states achieve their ideological and hegemonic goals. It is true that, in some societies, formal education may be provided privately i.e. separately from the state, but this is usually regulated and licensed by it. Such formal education is characterised also by institutional instruction, approved curricula, length of course and the award of credentials.

However, there are other ways for individuals to acquire knowledge and skills. These do not depend on formal structures, nor do they lead to an award. Instead, such learning is voluntary and determined by the specific needs of the individual or group. In post-Soviet society and the transition from authoritarianism, which is still under way, a *new popular education* of this type has emerged. It is provided by the many voluntary associations, clubs and other learning NGOs, which are authentic examples of civil society in Russia. We will focus on clubs in rural Russia.

### Rural Russia and its clubs

There are several thousand clubs throughout the vast area of rural Russia. A club is a typical means of communication and social engagement in these remote areas. They are sometimes located in well-built houses, with libraries, organised classes, a gym-hall and even a swimming-pool.



Figure 1. A club-house in rural Russia: Berendevo, Jaroslavl' Region.

<sup>1</sup> A. Rogers, *What is the Difference? A new critique of adult learning and teaching* (National Institute of Adult Continuing Education: Leicester, 2003).

<sup>2</sup> The data were collected by the Russian Institute of Sociology, Russian Academy of Sciences, during 2007-2012. Team leader Grigori A. Kliucharev.

But usually they are small clubs, situated two to three hours drive from the local regional centre. They are the only places for communal activities by local residents, and provide very basic amenities – such as opportunities for company and conversation, a library and reading-room, communal television, access to the Internet, public heating during the winter, facilities for games and sports, and local concerts during holidays. They are islands of informal learning, contributing to the maintenance of local knowledge and what may be described as a ‘cultural ecology’.<sup>3</sup> This is crucial to maintaining the social identity, self-esteem and civic self-confidence of local populations and minorities in contemporary rural Russia.

Quite recently, a new form of club has emerged, established by small business or, interestingly, social entrepreneurs. This is the so-called *Klubok* (small club). It is run on a personal initiative or by NGOs, and provides non-formal education, skills training and an introduction to the concepts and technologies of business and entrepreneurship, which are useful and yet relatively inexpensive.

### ***The facilities of rural clubs***

There are limitations and difficulties, especially in the availability and quality of club facilities. These may offer a modern club building, with a hall of 360 seats, classrooms for study circles, a library, television and computer rooms, central heating, a buffet, and clean toilets. In others, there will be only a wooden structure with stove heating, ‘amenities’ outside, and the only room a place where a few locals go to collect their pension, warm up and chat over a cup of tea during the cold season. The availability of equipment is one of the most important conditions for the effective pursuit of culture and leisure in a rural club, and the situation is extremely varied. In some regions the means have been found to buy relatively expensive items – sports and games equipment, professional sewing machines with software, music centres and equipment for discos. In other clubs, all that is available are black and white televisions, board games and a few books.

It is important whether or not a club has computer facilities. However, it is surprising that the demand for computers is still lower than the demand for audio equipment for discos, mass celebrations and festivals. As it stands, two-thirds of the clubs have no computers and therefore no Internet access and, according to club leaders, they ‘will not have such a possibility in the near future’. This is one of the factors hampering the development of modern recreational and information-based education. This may be compared with urban and metropolitan Russia, where the population has easy access to the neighbourhood computer clubs or Internet cafés.

The problem of financing clubs and their activities is quite acute. Only 2.5% of the club leaders say there is enough money to work effectively. (Fees for club membership and participation remain a relatively small contribution to finances, especially given the low average income levels of the rural population.)



Figure 2. Orel Rural Club.

However, there are some recent trends which are positive for the further democratisation of Russian public life.

- The financial autonomy of clubs, as a result of a slow growth in private donations and in local foundation grants. In some cases the local authorities provide a friendly tax climate, which is a result of co-operation between the club and the local state.
- The extensive use of volunteers as well as club leaders who are qualified professionally. This strengthens the autonomy of the clubs and gives them flexibility in programme organisation, timing and provision.
- The active competition with other providers of recreational and educational activities for local people, based on a monitoring of the cultural and learning needs of the rural population.
- The focus on the family as a whole. Each club member, independent of age, can participate in a variety of activities.
- The consideration of those with specific needs – vulnerable and at risk groups of the population: people with special needs and limited opportunities, the elderly, minorities and migrants.

### ***Local knowledge and community***

The development of the *new popular education* is a significant element of the programmes of rural clubs. This is found among all ages and is often a family learning activity. An example is the educational association *Native Pomor'e* in the republic of Karelia in northern Russia. It combines

<sup>3</sup> W.J. Morgan, ‘Local Knowledge and Globalisation: Are they compatible?’, in C. Cullingford and S. Gunn (eds), *Globalisation*,

*Education and Culture Shock* (Aldershot and Burlington, VA, 2005), pp. 35-47.

theoretical education with practical learning activities, which are focused according to the different ages and interests of members. At first, students are organised in several different groups which conduct studies of the traditions and life of northern coast-dwellers, and become acquainted with the history of the locality and region, through classes, reading and visits. This is followed by practical training: students learn to sew sails, construct and tar boats, navigate and survive at sea. Finally, the most 'interactive phase of the study' – voyages are made in sea-fishing boats to the skerries (islands), to visit remote villages and their inhabitants in the north White Sea region. As noted by one participant: 'I learned to make the bread recipes of native coast-dwellers, when an electric or gas stove was not available. The bread was not only delicious, better than what we buy in the city shops, but it also gave me a taste of childhood and of local traditions and their meaning for us today.'

The active connection of rural people with clubs also provides an effective framework for an autonomous civic education and for the development of public democratic consciousness. For example, the rural clubs are used to create informal networks to discuss local issues and solutions – road construction, landscaping, maintenance of personal and community security, control over the environment, local schools and health care, and so on. During such local discussions, information is exchanged and people become more critically aware of the resources and choices available to their particular settlement to resolve the problems that fall within the competence of local governments, what questions should be addressed to higher authorities, and how local interests should best be represented. As another participant said, 'Look, local authorities here very often

break their word. Last year we elected our new representative to the regional council and he promised the reconstruction of the central road in our village and three new wells. It is well known that there was a line in the budget to do this, but now there is no more money, no new road, no wells. What happened? You will see! Come to the club tonight where it will be decided by the village people.'

### Conclusion

Our hypothesis is that clubs, together with other local voluntary associations, are providers of democratic values in contemporary Russia. Indeed, one can say that they form and sustain the cultural space of rural communities, drawing on a combination of folk traditions, local knowledge, and a concern for the contemporary needs of the population and its local environment. The problems of local cultures are many and various, including earning a living, the environment, life-styles, community decision-making, and dealing with external authorities. Such informal communication and learning as we have described are crucial to the civic competence of a Russian population which has hitherto experienced either authoritarianism or political turbulence.

Such a *new popular education* is an important aspect of clubs and, in turn, of the social and economic survival of rural Russia. It is to some extent a reconstruction of the Houses of Culture of the Soviet era.<sup>4</sup> An important difference is that clubs today are not under ideological direction, while they look increasingly to function as associations autonomous of the State. Through a consideration of the cultural constructs underpinning the social networks of communities in Russia much can be learned about the health of its civil society.<sup>5</sup> Despite difficulties, the clubs contribute significantly to the social capital of rural Russia and to the democratisation of the country as a whole. They are authentic examples of an emerging Russian civil society.



Figure 3. Rural club members display traditional crafts.

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<sup>4</sup> B. Donahue and J.O. Habeck (eds), *Reconstructing the House of Culture: Community, Self and the Makings of Culture in Russia and Beyond*, (Berghahn Books: New York and Oxford, 2011); Miljusha Galeeva, *Clubs as a factor of self-realization in modern conditions* (Kazan, 2010) (in Russian).

<sup>5</sup> W.J. Morgan and G.A. Kliucharev, 'Non-formal education and civil society in post-Soviet Russia: What is the relationship?' *Policy Futures in Education*, 9:5 (2011), 628-30 .