

On life in Russian society

Report on a successful private initiative for the homeless

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Elena Danilova und
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(Picture pma)

This analysis is the result of observations and reflections on the issue of individual initiative in Russia. We do not claim to cover the whole issue, but we endeavour to present the facts and contexts in an objective way. We would like to invite discussion and we are looking forward to an exchange of experiences in relation to individual initiative

in Russia or in other countries.

Personal initiative in Russia: description of the situation

Russia is the largest country in the world in terms of surface area, with more than 17 million square kilometers – nearly twice the size of Canada, the second largest country, and about 415 times the size of Switzerland. With a population of approximately 146.8 million, Russia has 17 times more people than Switzerland. Historical factors characterize Russia as a country with a strong centralist orientation. Decisions are made “from above”: regional administrations are subordinated to the directives of the Kremlin. Thus, in terms of centralization, Russia's state structure is similar to that of France, for example. All taxes of the cities and regions go first to Moscow, and only afterwards part of it goes back into the regional budgets. As a result, problems in Russia have traditionally been solved by the state or, still too marginally, by local administration with regional competence. Federal separation of powers could be improved further.

As in other states, the preponderance of vertical power inhibits social cooperation as a problem-solving force. In Russia, this state of affairs has historically rooted reasons, which we cannot elaborate in this article. However, recent history

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Moments of “feeling at home” are offered by the largest homeless shelter in St. Petersburg. (all pictures www.homeless.ru)

alone provides some of the reasons: the social convulsions of the 1990s under Yeltsin, combined with the widespread criminality and corruption at the time, helped destroy interpersonal trust. Since Putin came to power, many social and economic improvements, have given people some hope; what has remained, however, is the faith that the state may not be able to solve all the problems, but generally knows how to handle the driving wheel.

A development towards greater participation, co-decision and co-responsibility is a very important long-term change. If everyone understands that not only his family depends on him, but also his surroundings, his immediate social environment, then this would contribute significantly to the well-being of people all over Russia – our vast homeland.

How Russian citizens assess their opportunities for participating

To illustrate this issue, we refer to some statistical data that show how Russian citizens assess their opportunities for participating.

The annual report «Public Opinion 2020»¹ contains a series of questions and answers that reflect the self-assessment of responsibility and individual influence of Russians. The extrapolation of the statistics shows that the citizens' sense of responsibility for issues concerning their immediate environment, their neighborhood, their city and their country isn't very high. Their perception is probably similar to that of inhabitants of large Western European cities.

For example, when asked, “to what extent do you think you can influence what is happening in



Almost "home". A rehabilitation programme for people suffering from alcohol and drug addiction.

your house or backyard?" Only one in five people answer, "to a large extent," while the most common response (34%) is, "to a small extent."

To the question: "to what extent do you feel responsible for what is happening in your city or district?" The most frequent answer (48%) is: "I do not feel responsible at all" and the second most frequent answer (34%) is: "to a small extent". When asked, "to what extent do you feel you can influence what is happening in your city or district?", "the most common response (38%) was "not at all", the second most common response (37%) was "to a small extent."

As for the situation in the country, the differences are even more dramatic. Thus, to the question: "to what extent do you feel responsible for what is happening in your country?" 60% of respondents answer: "I don't feel responsible at all", the second most common response (24%) was "to a small extent". To the question: "to what extent do you think you can influence what is happening in your country?" The most common answer (55%) is: "not at all". The second most common response (26%) is: "to a small extent".

Statistical data show that half or two thirds of Russian citizens feel little or no responsibility for what is happening in their building, their backyard, their neighbourhood, their city and their country, or they often think that they can have

little or no influence in this area. These results are alarming. They show a powerlessness and a lack of initiative. Other statistical data also show that the president and the "siloviki" (defense apparatus) enjoy a great degree of confidence. Nevertheless, we believe that it would be good for Russia and our citizens if we could have more say in decision making and proposing our own initiatives.

Private non-profit initiatives

For a healthy and dynamic life in society, it is necessary to become aware that one is really capable of improving the situation of those around you. Politics and the media could use their influence by pointing out that every citizen can do more than passively wait for decisions made by the state. Successful initiatives can demonstrate that it is possible to have an influence on everyday problems. It is important that such individual initiatives come into being without political manipulation or influence from within or without. Otherwise, the attraction for the citizens to take the initiative disappears and the state or other organizations take the credit for their activities. Joy and pride arise by performing mutual activities for the common good. Political interference can easily disrupt such endeavors.

Here is an example of a non-profit initiative that was eventually supported by the authorities.

Non-profit organisation «Notchlejka»

The non-profit organisation *Notchlejka* (in English: Night shelter) is a private initiative that helps the homeless find their way back to a normal life. The organization provides clothing, food, warmth in heated places and tents, and medication. It recruits volunteers on social media and overcomes stereotypes. "We want our

Questions	To a small extent	Not at all
To what extent do you think you can influence what is happening in your house or backyard?	34%	28%
To what extent do you feel responsible for what is happening in your city or district?	34%	48%
To what extent do you feel you can influence what is happening in your city or district?	37%	38%
To what extent do you feel responsible for what is happening in your country?	24%	60%
To what extent do you think you can influence what is happening in your country?	26%	55%

Table 1: Selected questions and most frequent answers.
Source: Annual report "Public opinion 2020, Levada Centre", p. 39–40.

society to be more humane, for people to understand that anyone can end up on the street and that it's natural to help someone in need. By telling people who the homeless are, how they ended up on the street, why they need help and how we provide it, we fight preconceived notions about homelessness and can also generate funds for our work," is how the goals of this institution are explained on the website.²

Notchlejka was founded during the most difficult period in recent Russian history, in 1990, by *Valery Sokolov* and like-minded people. At that time, due to food shortages, food ration cards were introduced in St. Petersburg, distributed according to the places of residence. This meant that the homeless were not entitled to ration cards. The organization finally prompted the decision of the city administration to issue cards for basic foodstuffs also to the homeless.

Help for the homeless now incorporated in law

Today, Notchlejka continues to work in this spirit. Thus, in November 2020, a commentary on the draft law of the Ministry of Labour entitled "About social protection of disabled people" was prepared and sent to the ministry. This law allows people with disabilities to receive wheelchairs, eye prostheses, hearing aids, orthopedic shoes and other essential items without being attached to a fixed place of residence and without having to register permanently. The updated draft bill has already been approved by the relevant departments and the government, examined by the State Duma and the Federation Council, and finally signed by the President on December 8. This is stated in the *November and December 2020 reports* on this project.³



A laundrette for homeless people. Here they can wash and dry their clothes free of charge. This also contributes to restoring human dignity.

One of the important concerns of the institution is psychological and legal counselling. Advice on finding a job can also be obtained by anyone, even without any documents or Russian citizenship. Every day, about 40 people are given advice.

The non-profit initiative Notchlejka shows us that even in critical and dangerous situations Russians can help each other and even influence the law. If this is the case, we could even find solutions for less complicated regional concerns.

Such examples of people's involvement in private, non-profit initiatives strengthen the interpersonal bonds in society and give fellow citizens more optimism.

(Translation «Swiss Standpoint»)

¹ Annual Report Public opinion 2020, Levada Centre 2021. 152 pages

² Notchlejka's website: <https://homeless.ru/>

³ Notchlejka's November and December 2020 Report: https://homeless.ru/upload/iblock/a59/Otchet_noyabr_dekabr.pdf