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Social Activism of Russian NGOs during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Abstract: The COVID-19 pandemic posed significant challenges to the non-profit sector, which responded with sustainability and adaptability. Russian NGOs quickly adjusted their programs to virtual formats, engaging with beneficiaries and stakeholders online. However, reduced funding and financial strain became prevalent as donations decreased, prompting organizations to optimize operations and seek new sources of support.

Amid the crisis, NGOs demonstrated their indispensable role in directly assisting vulnerable populations, delivering essential goods and medical supplies, and offering psychological and legal support. Mobilizing volunteers was crucial in extending the impact of NGO aid initiatives.

The pandemic also allowed NGOs to influence policy changes and advocate for targeted support measures for vulnerable groups. Despite existing constraints, they actively shaped policies that addressed social inequalities exposed during the pandemic.

In the future, the sector must address financial dependence on government funding and focus on developing sustainable, long-term solutions. The Russian non-profit sector can continue to address social challenges and promote societal change by building on the newfound culture of charity and civic engagement,

Keywords: COVID-19 pandemic, Russian non-profit sector, NGO, Social policy

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Družbeni aktivizem ruskih nevladnih organizacij v času pandemije COVID-19

Izvleček: Pandemija COVID-19 je pomenila velik izziv za neprofitni sektor, ki se je odzval trajnostno in prilagodljivo. Ruske nevladne organizacije so svoje programe hitro prilagodile virtualnim oblikam ter z upravičenci in zainteresiranimi stranmi sodelovali prek spletja. Vendar so zaradi zmanjšanja donacij prevladovali zmanjšano financiranje in finančni pritiski, kar je organizacije spodbudilo k optimizaciji delovanja in iskanju novih virov podpore.

Med krizo so nevladne organizacije dokazale svojo nepogrešljivo vlogo pri zagotavljanju neposredne pomoči ranljivim skupinam prebivalstva, pri dostavi osnovnih dobrin in medicinskih pripomočkov ter nudenu psihološke in pravne podpore. Mobilizacija prostovoljev je imela ključno vlogo pri povečanju učinka pobud NVO za pomoč.

Pandemija je nevladnim organizacijam ponudila tudi priložnosti za vplivanje na spremembe politike in zagovarjanje ciljno usmerjenih podpornih ukrepov za ranljive skupine. Kljub obstoječim omejitvam so imele aktivno vlogo pri oblikovanju politik, ki so obravnavale družbene neenakosti, razkrite med pandemijo.

V prihodnosti mora sektor odpraviti finančno odvisnost od vladnega financiranja in se osredotočiti na razvoj trajnostnih in dolgoročnih rešitev. Ruski neprofitni sektor lahko na podlagi novo odkrite kulture dobrodelnosti in državljanskega udejstvovanja še naprej obravnava družbene izzive in spodbuja spremembe v družbi.

Ključne besede: pandemija COVID-19, ruski neprofitni sektor, nevladne organizacije, socialna politika

Introduction

Non-profit, non-governmental organizations improve the living standards of vulnerable groups, participate in structural changes in the social, economic, and political areas, make legislative initia-

tives, and conduct fundamental research. Such organizations can deal with the consequences during local or global crises, helping the most affected population groups. However, at the same time, NGOs depend on funding sources and feel the consequences of any economic downturn due to their status and peculiarities of functioning.

The term 'Non-Commercial Organization'² in Russia covers various legal entities of various organizational and legal forms. For this article, NGOs can be conditionally divided by areas of activity into Socially Oriented NCOs (SO NCOs), which are engaged in solving social problems practically without interference in political activities, and organizations whose purpose is human rights, lawmaking and development of civil society.

During the COVID-19 virus pandemic, the Russian society and state also faced complex tasks of overcoming this crisis's medical and socio-economic consequences. Social changes and constraints have revealed and exacerbated pre-existing socio-economic inequalities in society. Vulnerable populations, including the elderly, low-income families, persons with disabilities and marginalized groups, were disproportionately affected by the pandemic.

The pandemic was a severe test for the non-profit sector, which by 2020 was in a situation of structural imbalance under the influence of legislative and political reforms of the second decade of the 21st century. New challenges manifested themselves in the problems of financing non-profit activities, the emergence of global tasks in the field of solving social problems and the lack of volunteer resources, imperfect legislation, and uncertainty of the status of NGOs within the framework of economic and political processes in the country.

² In Russian legislation and research practice, the terms 'non-commercial/non-profit organization' (NCO / NPO) and 'non-governmental organization' (NGO) formally have the same meaning. For this article, these terms will be used as synonyms.

Under these conditions, on the one hand, the role of civil society organizations has become even more significant, as NGOs have become more active in addressing the population's pressing problems and providing support to vulnerable segments of the population. Many NGOs in Russia were highly adaptable to rapidly changing conditions, socially engaged, and played a significant role in assisting, disseminating important information, and building solidarity throughout the pandemic. As traditional ways of working became impossible due to restrictions and social exclusion measures, NGOs embraced digital transformation, using online platforms and technologies to remotely provide essential services and support to those in need.

Another factor that has increased the effectiveness of NGOs' social work has been the growth of the volunteer movement. This has increased the reach and impact of their efforts to help those in need and has positively impacted system building and the development of organizational tools (skills) for long-term engagement with volunteers for many NGOs.

During the pandemic, under the influence of financial and organizational problems, preconditions for institutional changes in the non-profit sector were created. There is a reduction in the number of NCOs due to the displacement of organizations that failed to cope with new challenges, a reduction in the range and volume of NCO services, and a reduction in administrative and organizational support. The split between SO NCOs and human rights NGOs deepened even further during this period.

This research examines the responses to change and various aspects of social activism of Russian NGOs in facing new risks, threats, and constraints during the COVID-19 pandemic. We explore the critical role of NGOs in providing information transparency, combating misinformation, and advocating for policy change

to address emerging issues and pooling resources of various entities (private, public, governmental) to create a more comprehensive and coordinated response to the crisis. Using a systems approach, we will explore these organizations' diverse contributions and strategies for assisting healthcare providers and supporting vulnerable communities. We aim to gain insight into the adaptive responses of NGOs to the pandemic, including their use of digital technologies to sustain their activities in the face of blockages and measures of social distancing. The study and analysis of the processes outlined will allow us to more accurately determine new directions for the development of the non-profit sector in the future, including in the context of new political and economic crises.

Theoretical Framework for the Study

The COVID-19 pandemic has underscored the essential role of non-profit, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in addressing social challenges. Civil society, encompassing a diverse array of non-governmental organizations, plays a pivotal role in shaping the interaction dynamics between society, including various social groups and governmental entities. This involvement stretches across social, economic, and political realms, often operating as intermediaries between the state and society. This study's theoretical framework is grounded in the concept of civil society, which recognizes NGOs as vital agents of social change.

Moreover, the interactions between state and non-state structures are characterized by interdependence. This interdependence fosters cooperation, replacing elements of competition with mutual complementarity. This cooperative framework allows for joint problem-solving, harnessing the potential of both sectors, while simultaneously exposing potential organizational vulnerabilities within private organizations.

Within the framework of this study, the participation of NGOs in crisis response, serving as an extension of the state to provide social services to the population, is considered within the concept of indirect public management (Salamon 2002). Additionally, new philanthropy is highly relevant for examining the changes in funding mechanisms and support for Russian NGOs during the pandemic and their adaptation to evolving philanthropic activities (Salamon 2014).

The COVID-19 pandemic represented an unparalleled global crisis, challenging the adaptability and resilience of NGOs. This study examines how NGOs navigated the challenges posed by the pandemic, adapted their activities, and continued to fulfill their missions by drawing from the concept of crisis management and resilience.

A comprehensive understanding of social activism and volunteerism is necessary to analyze the response of Russian NGOs to the pandemic. This framework encompasses the concepts of social activism, volunteering, and the mobilization of civil society to address pressing social issues.

Data Collection Methods

A mixed method and data triangulation approach was used to collect and analyze data related to Russian NGOs' response to the COVID-19 pandemic. This approach included both primary and secondary sources.

Primary data were collected through semi-structured interviews with NGO leaders from Nizhny Novgorod, Vologda, and Rostov regions. The main objective of the interviews was to obtain detailed information about NGOs' experiences, strategies they used in response to the pandemic, challenges they faced, and mechanisms for interacting with the authorities.

NGOs were selected for interviews based on a purposive sampling strategy. NGOs were selected based on their involvement in

community activities during the pandemic, ensuring that different types of organizations were represented. Thematic analysis was used as the primary method of data processing.

Secondary data were collected from available reports, publications, and official documents posted on the Internet related to NGO activities during the pandemic. Desk-based secondary analysis techniques were used to extract relevant information from these documents.

Adapting to new realities

The COVID-19 pandemic outbreak in Russia required non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to adapt quickly and deeply to respond effectively to the crisis while respecting sanitary norms and restrictions. This section reviews the adaptation measures taken by Russian NGOs to overcome the difficulties caused by the pandemic.

At the end of March 2020, *restrictive measures* against the spread of coronavirus infection were introduced at the state level. A temporary quarantine was declared, and a remote format of work and activities was introduced in most areas of the economy. In this regard, most NGOs also had to adapt programs, projects, and activities to online formats. Virtual meetings, webinars, and online seminars have become acceptable alternatives for conducting trainings, sharing information, and interacting with beneficiaries and stakeholders. This transition has allowed many NGOs to maintain continuity of their activities and important links with target groups. However, as the March 2020 CAF Charitable Foundation survey of Russian NGO representatives shows, many respondents noted difficulties adapting to the new conditions (CAF 2020). These include insufficient technical infrastructure and competencies for remote (online) work, difficulty adapting current programs and projects to the new conditions, and unpreparedness of

beneficiaries to interact in online (Kosygina 2021, 29–30). However, only 5% of NGOs suspended their activities due to the emergency and restrictions imposed. Most organizations were able to adapt to the new conditions to a greater or lesser extent. Moreover, 20% of NGOs launched new programs to support pandemic survivors in the first months of the crisis. Most organizations assisted in the area of childcare (51%), support of people with disabilities (35%), and the elderly (22%) (Klishina et al. 2022, 29–32). By July 2020, 49% of NGOs had launched new programs to support people through hotlines, food, and non-food aid delivery for life support, and assistance to medical organizations (Kosygina 2021, 30). Thus, the need to adapt activities to the conditions of the pandemic has led, on the one hand, to a reduction in activities in the field of social services for needy categories of the population, on the other hand, to an increase in demand for emergency direct charitable services, volunteer assistance and the development of remote formats of work (online counseling, helplines, and others).

The second aspect the non-profit sector has had to adapt under the state of emergency is the *reduction in funding*. One of the structural features of Russia's non-profit sector at present is its strong dependence on government funding, poor development of fundraising tools, and independent sources of resource support for the activities of most NGOs. This situation resulted from a series of political and economic changes that took place in 2006–2020 and led to a significant disproportion both in the scope of Russian NGOs' activities (about 80% of organizations are engaged in helping people in difficult life situations and implementing projects in science, culture, and education) and in the availability of the primary sources of funding (about 10% of all organizations regularly receive government grants and subsidies from budgets of various levels) (Efimova 2023, 194–195). A significant proportion of NGOs

in Russia operate with minimal funding: about 30% of organizations have budgets of less than 100,000 rubles (1.5 thousand euros) annually. The funding for most organizations comes from individuals and organizations. In 2020, about 60% of charitable NGOs experienced a significant reduction in donations due to the difficult economic situation. Receipts from these sources decreased up to 80% compared to previous years. At the same time, profits from providing paid services in the social sphere (including at the expense of the state order) decreased (Mishina 2022). Many non-profit sector representatives note the reduction of state funding in the form of grants at the local level: 'In the year when the pandemic started, the annual grant competition for local NGOs was discontinued to optimize the city budget. Since then, this competition has never been resumed, despite our (NGO representatives) appeals to the authorities' (Chernova, personal interview). This led to optimizing expenditures, reducing staff, searching for new funding sources in new conditions, and changing strategic planning and organizational development. Insufficient diversification of funding sources and its significant reduction became obstacles to developing and implementing practical business processes and strategic development of most NGOs despite actualizing these tasks

In response to these challenges, many non-profit organizations have stepped up fundraising activities by launching online fundraising campaigns, and virtual charity events. Interaction with donors and supporters through digital crowdfunding platforms helped to expand outreach and maintain financial stability for ongoing aid activities. Another necessary consequence of this situation was the increased activity of NGOs in obtaining support measures from the state, especially since the state introduced 2020–2021 several new support measures for organizations affected by the COVID-19 epidemic and improved the legislative regu-

lation of measures available to NGOs earlier. Thus, in mid-2020, a federal register of socially oriented NGOs and a register of organizations affected by the COVID-19 epidemic were formed. The creation of these registers became the basis for the emergence of new measures to support NPOs in the country. The most demanded measures were:

- Rent and tax vacations for tenants of state and municipal property, allocation of new premises from municipal and state property for SO NGOs,³
- Temporary exemption of NGO employees from paying personal income tax on their salaries,
- Reduced rates for compulsory social and medical insurance for NGO employees,
- State subsidies for employee training and payment of salaries of newly hired NGO employees,
- Preferential loans for NGOs to finance their activities,
- Increased state support for NGOs to implement socially significant projects and provide social services to citizens (additional grant competitions primarily at the federal level),
- Reduction in the number of control measures by government agencies,
- Tax incentives and subsidies to commercial enterprises. On June 08, 2020, the Tax Code of the Russian Federation was amended to return the profit tax exemptions for businesses

³ According to the legislation of the Russian Federation, Socially Oriented Non-Profit Organizations (SO NCOs) are NCOs engaged in activities aimed at solving social problems and developing civil society. In 2020, a state register of SO NCOs was created, which by the end of 2020 included about 40 thousand organizations. Participation in state grant competitions was the main criterion for inclusion in the register. The organizations included in this register must have a priority right to receive a wide range of state support measures.

supporting SO NCOs, which were abolished in 2005. Thus, commercial enterprises could allocate a portion of their income from tax savings to support NGO activities.

Despite the significance of the adopted measures of state support for NGOs, the third sector's representatives still have questions. As the researchers note, the support measures were mainly aimed at socially oriented NGOs – only organizations that were included in the relevant state register (about 30 thousand organizations in 2020 out of more than 209 thousand NGOs), and not all of them used the full range of new instruments of state support (Kosygina 2021, 32–33). Second, some of the measures were significantly delayed or did not apply to the activities of NGOs due to the length and complexity of bureaucratic procedures (Kovalenko and Zayakin 2020, 7–9). However, for many non-profit organizations, this situation has become an opportunity for development. It was essential for small regional NCOs to intensify their interactions with government structures, businesses, and the public.

Another vital aspect of NGOs' adaptation to pandemic challenges has been adopting *digital and distance technologies* in very different areas of activity, in addition to the already mentioned direct work with beneficiaries (online consultations, distance learning, video-conferencing activities, virtual psychological support networks, and others) and online fundraising (crowdfunding platforms, remote communication with donors, collection of private donations, and others). The use of social networks, websites, and online platforms to disseminate reliable information about COVID-19, prevention measures, and available assistance and health-care resources in the Russian non-profit sector has reached a significantly higher level than before. In addition, many NGOs actively participated in targeted information campaigns to promote public health practices such as wearing masks, hand hygiene, and

physical distancing (Korneeva 2020, 11). These were forced measures during the pandemic, but active NGOs now use the acquired competencies and resources to digitize current activities, communicate with beneficiaries, volunteers, donors, and authorities, and scale up activities.

However, for most Russian NGOs, the low level of digitalization made it difficult or impossible to restructure work processes in the new realities, as it required organizational readiness and substantial logistical resources. The complexity of transition to remote work and online communications also depended on the format of the organization's functioning. NCOs mainly working with wards of social institutions (prisons, hospices, hospitals, boarding schools, and others) faced the inability to maintain social work activity at the previous level (Skokova et al. 2021, 62–64). The same situation is typical for organizations whose activities are aimed at helping people with socially significant diseases or disabilities. Developed large NGOs with highly qualified staff and sufficient material and technical resources to develop online formats have become more involved in activities with authorities and patients and have reached wider audiences. For NPOs that are less organizationally developed, the transition to an online interaction format with beneficiaries and donors reduced the number of events, the audience of participants, and the social impact of activities (Center for Humanitarian Technologies and Research 2022). Many of the leaders of small regional NGOs we interviewed note that '*digitalization*' of activities required significant efforts and resources: 'Organizations that owned online formats of work began to hold more events [...] to work from different cities with both specialists and beneficiaries [...] Many small NGOs were not able to adapt to the new realities, including due to the lack of resources for organizational activities' (Grishina, personal interview). 'Our specialists

had to master digital technologies at a higher level in working with clients and solving administrative tasks. Had it not been for the grant (as part of the Potanin Foundation's competition for organizational development of NGOs), we might not have had enough resources of our own' (G. Smirnova, personal interview).

Adapting to new realities during the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated the Russian third sector's resilience, flexibility, and resourcefulness. By embracing digital transformation and adjusting their strategies, many NGOs continued to serve their beneficiaries and support communities. However, for most organizations, restrictive measures and economic obstacles caused a decline in social engagement, loss of financial stability, and organizational problems.

NGO participation in pandemic emergencies

The introduction of quarantine and self-isolation affected all categories of the population. However, it was especially difficult for representatives of vulnerable groups, such as the elderly, people with disabilities, low-income families, children in orphanages, students, migrants, prisoners, the homeless, and others. (Barysheva, Antipanova, and Thanh 2020, 106–109; Walker 2023) NGOs during the pandemic began to adapt their activities and programs to provide the most needed assistance, primarily to their primary beneficiaries. NGO initiatives for affected communities can be categorized in the following areas:

- Direct assistance to specific categories of people in need, primarily providing vulnerable categories of the population with food, essential goods, medical equipment, and means of protection;
- Psychological and legal assistance to those affected by the pandemic;
- Support for health care institutions and medical workers;
- Promotion of information transparency;

- Participation in developing and adopting political decisions supporting the non-profit sector and individual social groups and overcoming the crisis.

Assistance to vulnerable people

The most active assistance of Russian NGOs during the pandemic was manifested in supporting unprotected categories of the population. The regime of self-isolation and economic restrictions worsened the situation of population groups that were at risk even before the pandemic. The most demanded and widespread assistance measures to these categories were providing foodstuffs and delivering necessities and medical supplies. Narrowly specialized NGOs aided their primary beneficiaries, members, and patients. Organizations whose main activities were suspended under pandemic restrictions were included in interagency or partnership projects with other NGOs, commercial enterprises, or authorities of different levels (Korneeva 2020, 3–6).

In addition to providing food and necessities to those in need in forced isolation, specialized NGOs aided their beneficiaries, taking into account their specific needs and conditions (Klishina et al. 2022, 30–32; Korneeva 2020, 5–7; Mikov 2020, 5–7). Among the numerous initiatives, it is worth highlighting projects that have influenced long-term development in their field. Thus, providing temporary accommodation in daycare centers and families of wards of orphanages, psychoneurological boarding schools, and children's hospices became a significant step in developing accompanied accommodation for these categories of people in need. Many experts note that this practice did not become mass, despite the introduction of temporary measures of additional state support for guardians: 'In our and other regions, there was a practice when children from orphanages were taken into families for the

duration of the pandemic... both private volunteers and employees of non-profit organizations. However, it was not mass and did not affect adults with disabilities and the elderly at all' (Smirnova, personal interview). The specialized NGOs faced the problem of access to boarding schools with which they cooperated before the pandemic: 'We came to the boarding school to help our charges, but they would not even open the gates for us' (Lyubimova, personal interview). Providing electronic means of communication (tablets, smartphones, laptops) to lonely elderly people in nursing homes accelerated the digitalization processes of these institutions. The involvement of NGOs in providing people living with HIV with antiretroviral drugs has actualized the problem of availability of these medicines in the country and the vulnerability of these people's rights. The need to control the spread of COVID-19 in prisons and colonies and the struggle for prisoners' rights in the new conditions intensified the activities of human rights organizations helping convicts and their families (Mikov 2020, 6; OSCE 2022). The experience of implementing distance support programs to address mental health problems, combat social isolation, and protect rights has significantly expanded the market of social services in general and the capacity of NGOs in this direction, in particular.

One of the critical strategies for social activism during a pandemic is *partnership and collaboration* between NGOs, businesses, and government agencies. Many organizations are united in formalized or informal coalitions on sectoral or regional basis. The pooling of resources has improved the quality and quantity of mutual information and methodological and organizational support between non-profit organizations. In different regions, the coordinating role was played by large local charitable foundations, community foundations, regional Public Chambers, or party organizations (Gimazova 2021, 149; Semikova 2021, 43–44; Telitsina 2020,

122–123). The digitalization of NGO work played a significant role in this: ‘The possibility for specialists from NGOs from different cities to work together, hold meetings, organize strategic planning, and training in an online format have brought non-profit organizations closer together not only within the local community but also in areas of activity at a fundamentally higher level than before’ (Grishina, personal interview).

It was also common practice to implement joint projects with business companies ranging from large industrial enterprises and retail chains to local individual entrepreneurs (Mikov 2020, 4–5). Mainly due to such features of non-profit organizations’ functioning as local presence, close contact with target audiences, and the ability to make quick decisions allowed for a rapid response to acute needs for the needy categories of citizens most severely affected by the situation of self-isolation and quarantine (Kulko-va 2020). The experience of cooperation with businesses and authorities became the basis for the growth of trust in the non-profit sector and infrastructural development. Many business representatives and large NGOs during the pandemic period significantly increased charitable donations not only to address social problems but also to develop NGO activities in general, including strategic, infrastructural, and organizational development of the sector (Ber-hin 2020; Kosygina 2020, 34–35; Kovalenko 2020, 9–12).

Mobilizing and engaging volunteers during a pandemic

Data from several sociological surveys conducted in 2020–2022 show that during the pandemic period, there was a significant increase in public demand for NGO participation and volunteer assistance to those in need (Pevnaya et al. 2021; Mersianova 2020). At the same time, the COVID-19 pandemic caused an upsurge in solidarity and people’s desire to contribute to the relief efforts. At

the same time, the processes of public involvement in volunteer activities are intensifying across the country. Spontaneous initiatives are being formed by citizens trying to provide emergency aid to those in need with their resources. Non-profit organizations promptly mobilized their volunteers and attracted new ones to solve various tasks to help their beneficiaries.

They were volunteers who played a crucial role in increasing the impact of NGO aid initiatives. In turn, they were non-profit organizations that most often became the coordinators and organizers of volunteer work at the local and regional levels. New volunteer training programs were developed and implemented in many regions to engage volunteers effectively. For volunteers with specific roles, specialized training was provided, such as medical protocols, crisis counseling, or remote communication techniques. NGO specialists drew on their experience and expertise to match volunteers with tasks matching their competencies, ensuring their contributions were meaningful and impactful.

As in other areas of NGO social activity, the need for social distance has impacted volunteering. Remote volunteering initiatives were introduced and actively developed in the Russian third sector. Volunteers performed tasks such as data entry, translation, content creation, and virtual support from the comfort of their homes. One of the in-demand areas of remote volunteering was educational work, combating false information, and promoting vaccination (Center for Humanitarian Technologies and Research 2022, 12; Korneeva 2020, 11). Besides, remote volunteering helped to reduce the acuteness of psychological problems of self-isolation.

In general, non-profit specialists note that the absolute number of organized volunteers in Russia grew modestly during the initial period of the pandemic. 'Many local and regional volunteer associations appeared, which started their activities in solving the

problems of the pandemic and continued to actively expand their work after the pandemic was over' (Smirnova, personal interview). About 3% of Russians were involved in systematic volunteer activities through NGOs in 2020, as in previous years. However, during the expansion of the fight against the consequences of the coronavirus, there were significant structural changes in volunteering: a significant increase and renewal of the composition of volunteer communities and organizations, an increase in the share of volunteers between 31 and 40 years of age, an increase in internal (self-esteem) and external requirements for the health status of volunteers, active use of mass media and social networks to highlight their activities (Berhin 2020; Mersianova and Ivanova, 2021, 120–123). During this period the growth of spontaneous (self-organized) volunteer initiatives began and continues, increasing the number of people who independently participate in charitable or volunteer activities. This, on the one hand, contributes to the development of the culture of charity and mutual aid. On the other hand, these processes shift the trends of civil activism development from the solution of political, human rights, and acute social problems to charity and social assistance to needy categories of the population to a greater extent than before the pandemic. 'Our organization [before the pandemic] attracted a small number of volunteers due to the specifics of work [professional psychological assistance to families with disabled children]. During the pandemic, this direction stopped altogether because they [volunteers] [...] saw their activities only in the interests of those directly affected by COVID-19' (Ivanova, personal interview).

Support for healthcare workers

One of the Russian NGOs' most significant social activity during the pandemic was assistance to healthcare institutions and

medical workers who were on the front line of the pandemic, facing a shortage of personal protective equipment (PPE), medicines, and other necessary materials. This was especially important during the early stages of the pandemic when there was a worldwide shortage of personal protective equipment. Many major charitable foundations organized fundraisers to purchase medical supplies. Others organized independent production of PEE (Korneeva 2020, 8). Significant funds and efforts of charitable organizations were also directed to equipping additional hospital beds. They procured and distributed artificial lung ventilation devices, oxygen concentrators, test kits, and other necessary medical equipment. Some organizations set up temporary medical centers to receive patients. In collaboration with businesses and involving volunteers, initiatives were organized in many cities to provide food and drinking water to medical teams. By supporting health infrastructure, NGOs sought to reduce staff workload and improve the quality of patient care.

The pandemic harmed the psychological and mental state of health workers, who faced enormous stress and workload (Galkina and Egorova, 2021). To address this problem, some NGOs with relevant experience in working with target groups initiated mental health support programs designed specifically for health workers. Professional counseling, self-help groups, and virtual therapy sessions helped health workers cope with emotional difficulties related to their work. During the pandemic, new specialized non-profit organizations and charitable foundations were established in different regions of Russia to help, support, and protect health workers' rights. 'Our (Charitable) Foundation was established during the pandemic to assist health workers when facing the toughest psychological and professional challenges. However, we want this work not to stop after the pandemic is over' (Kouletova, person-

al interview). NCOs initiated mass media campaigns to support medical workers and express public gratitude to them. Later, this work was continued by educational organizations and state structures to raise the prestige of medical professions and specialties.

Participation in political decision-making

Characteristic features of the non-profit sector in Russia under the existing political system are its dependence on and control over the authorities, its focus on social problems, and the riskiness of political participation and human rights activism. The existing legal practice of administrative pressure and control has led to the fact that most NGOs do not risk actively participating in political processes and building subjective relations with the authorities. An exception is a small number of specialized NGOs working in advocacy for specific vulnerable categories of the population, monitoring civil and political processes, solving environmental problems, and having experience in implementing and promoting political decisions. The current legislation seriously limits the opportunities and potential of third-sector organizations in political and civic activism.

The COVID-19 pandemic brought challenges and vulnerabilities that required the government and organizations to make rapid decisions and seek new measures. In March 2020, a high alert and self-isolation regime was introduced in Russia. This was followed in April by introducing penalties for violating anti-epidemiological restrictions in criminal and administrative legislation. The introduction of sanitary and epidemiological restrictions and the general socio-economic crisis during the COVID-19 pandemic had a severe and multidirectional impact on the opportunities and manifestations of civic activism and political participation worldwide. This situation exacerbated the existing forms of social inequality in Russian society and gave rise to new ones, many of which had

not been previously manifested: between intellectual workers and those directly employed in industry, between the inhabitants of capitals (Moscow and St. Petersburg) and regions, and in favor of the latter, age inequality, infringement of the rights of people suffering from various diseases (HIV, cancer, diabetes, tuberculosis), gender inequality – the burden on mothers has increased due to the transfer of children to distance learning (Baturenko 2020, 14; Viktorov 2020, 18–19; Volkova 2020, 20–22). In response, Russian NGOs and individual activists intensified information and advocacy activities aimed at policy change and addressing the challenges posed by the pandemic. Social activism has risen from an informal level to a more organized phenomenon in some areas. To begin with, it concerns the protection of the rights of vulnerable categories. Many initiatives of non-profit organizations aimed at identifying and eliminating inequalities in access to health care, social support, and economic assistance were supported by the authorities at the local and regional levels. One of the main areas of advocacy was the formation of assistance measures aimed at targeted support for vulnerable groups. The efforts led to the expansion of the social safety net and the creation of extraordinary financial assistance programs for specific categories of the population most affected by the economic impact of the pandemic. The spread of new ways has also facilitated this and approaches to communicating with administrations using remote technologies.

Another trend is that NCOs tried to continue lawmaking and human rights activities in specialized areas. For example, in April 2020, nine Russian NPOs involved in the prevention of domestic violence addressed the government with a proposal to take several urgent measures in this area. However, in July 2020, in their report to the Council of Europe on domestic violence during COVID-19 in Russia, the authors stated that despite a positive shift in

the perception of domestic violence by the Russian authorities, the response of the authorities appears to be inconsistent and insufficiently effective (ANNA et al. 2020, 7–10). Another example is the protection of prisoners' rights. Non-governmental organizations working to protect the prisoners' rights have proposed measures to reduce the risk of coronavirus infection in prisons. Government authorities have considered some of these but have implemented them minimally (Human Rights 2020, 17–20).

In April 2020, measures were adopted to promote temporary custody of residential care residents (minors and adults with disabilities, elderly people) (Gentilini et al. 2022, 683; Walker 2023), according to some data for April–June 2020, about 5.5 thousand people were taken under temporary custody (Lenc 2021). However, this primarily concerned children and many specialized organizations note that the legislative framework's imperfection in distributed guardianship did not allow these initiatives to be fully implemented: 'We are at a legal impasse' (Allenova 2020).

The situation with political and civic activism during the pandemic period intensified the existing contradictions and imperfections in certain aspects of the Russian third sector. The current legislation and the mechanisms of pressure on organizations make it possible to limit the activities of independent organizations.

Conclusions

The COVID-19 pandemic was a test for the entire global community and brought risks and new opportunities for developing the Russian non-profit sector. They contributed significantly to mitigating the pandemic's effects on vulnerable groups, developing a sense of solidarity in society, and increasing the activity of volunteer initiatives.

Most organizations were able to adapt and restructure their activities successfully. This allowed them to learn new tools for work-

ing with counterparties, partners, and beneficiaries, to increase the digitalization of internal administrative and working processes, to reach new audiences, and to acquire skills for effective interaction with donors and authorities. Many socially active NGOs formed new relationships with business structures and introduced effective fundraising and crowdfunding tools. All this continues to support the third sector's development even after removing the main epidemiological restrictions.

At the same time, many NGOs during this period were forced to reduce the scope of their work or cease to exist altogether. This affected small regional NGOs, which did not have the resources and opportunities to restructure their activities in the new realities, and large organizations and foundations, which could not find new resources and donors sufficient to maintain and adapt their activities to replace those who stopped regular donations during this period. Many NGO leaders noted the emotional burnout of sector professionals during the pandemic as one of the reasons for the decline in the organizations' activities: 'After the death [from COVID] of the leaders of two active NGOs in our city, their activities stopped. Many professionals [...] could never rehabilitate themselves and left the social sector. Moreover, many such examples exist among colleagues' (Grishina, personal interview).

The critical factors of NGO sustainability during the pandemic that allowed them to maintain and even intensify their activities were flexibility and readiness to adapt to new conditions, a combination of statutory activities to implement the mission of the organization with active work on direct assistance to those in need, a combination of short-term planning and strategic priorities, ability to adapt services to support beneficiaries, and ability to receive public funding or availability of diversified sources of resources.

Russian NGOs advocated for policy changes during the COVID-19 pandemic, influencing relief efforts and shaping policies to meet the needs of vulnerable populations. Their work resulted in more inclusive relief efforts, improved health policies, and targeted support for those most affected by the pandemic. The activity and significance of the contribution of non-profit organizations in addressing the social problems of this period influenced the changing relationship of the third sector with the state. NGOs suddenly turned out to be a socially significant force. It affected the willingness and readiness of non-profit organizations to consolidate and build long-term partnerships, including the development of common standards of quality and forms of work, ethics, and joint activities in the advocacy of political goals.

Another significant consequence of the epidemic was the quantitative growth of the volunteer movement in Russia, both organized and informal. Volunteer activity spreads to other areas of care and social protection. In the long term, this may become the basis for the recovery and development of civic activism.

At the same time, all the weaknesses of the Russian third sector related to institutional imperfection, non-self-sufficiency, and dependence on state policy appeared. Organizations that tried to influence the solution of problems of disadvantage groups not only failed to achieve significant changes compared to pre-pandemic times but also faced increased pressure and restrictions from the state under the pretext of anti-vaccine measures. The principle of selective access to financial and resource support measures for NGOs, depending on their status and sphere of activity, has been preserved. This is another risk for further sustainable development of the non-profit sector.

The negative consequences of the epidemic period for the third sector also include the increased bias towards 'low-level' volunteering instead of systemic work. Meeting the need for humanitarian assistance has led to a decline in integrated programmatic activi-

ties of professionalized NGOs in various areas of the social sphere. Humanitarian aid as a type of volunteer activity, on the one hand, is accessible and has evident effectiveness. The comprehensive development of volunteerism cannot replace long-term targeted work to overcome problems in the social area.

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