

Restricted collective action of the poor as a threat to dysfunctional democracy  
(working paper)

Introduction

Development of the adequate channels of public representation is considered an important function of democratic political systems. As the western tradition of social action studies infers, social movements make up for shortcomings of formal representation procedures, that leave some significant social interests omitted in decision making process. All the differences of approaches apart, social movement studies infer that there is an initial aspiration of initiating actors to make the discussion public and to rely on all possible support from allied actors and available resources to ensure maximum public exposure of the issue. Together with the description of actual collective activity, there appeared another problem - of explaining the deficits of social mobilization and informal representation of some fractions of the society that stayed tacit in spite of the fact that they had been obviously aggrieved and their essential interests not considered enough by authorities. In different cases the explanation may be found in the insufficient degree of grievances (relative deprivation theory), lack of necessary resources for mobilization and effective action (resource mobilization theory), unfavorable structural position of the group and its suppression by the authorities, and general composition of political opportunities for action (political opportunities perspective). However, the societies that demonstrate virtual lack of the social movements represent a principally different situation that requires to be explained through the general characteristics of the social and political structure. This kind of a complex approach may benefit from a broader theoretical perspective that tends to embrace diverse types of explanations of collective behavior. However, as there is a great deal of diversities among the societies, the wider theory would probably appear from the extensive field studies which are still to be done.

As postulated by Greskovits, the societies that bear the legacy of communism demonstrate significant differences in their predilection to social initiatives compared to

the western democracies or even to post-authoritarian countries<sup>1</sup>. The communist patrimony is distinguishable through consistently lower propensity to activist strategies, and prevalence of non-public, particularistic social response to hardships, or, in other words, if we employ Hirschman's dichotomy – definitive dominance of “exit” over “voice”. Numerous empirical studies confirm notably low trust and miserable rate of participation to grass-root activities in the post-communist countries<sup>2</sup>, even those with relatively light exposure to communist institutions<sup>3</sup>.

Though Hirschman himself interprets prevalence of “exit” as a sign of decline of an organization<sup>4</sup>, some states seem to deliberately secure this kind of social response by suppressing all forms of “voice”. Taking into consideration the distinctive political and cultural context of post-communist societies, the research of collective action shall pay particular attention to the political process factors that might reveal the institutional obstacles to public expressions of discontent. In the following sections we shall explore the institutional design of governmental and non-state agents that may explain exceptionally weak public response to hardships in post-communist Russia. However, not only deliberate efforts of formal actors are responsible for the low public activity of the aggrieved in Russia. The view from the side of political culture and path dependency patterns of civic participation provide a significant share of the explanation.

The distinctive coincidence of painful economical reforms with large scale social decomposition and political transformation exposed the Russian society to the load that far exceeds just the sum of the contributing factors. Additionally, the burden of multidimensional isochronal changes is being multiplied by their enduring over years that resulted in transformation of temporal difficulties into immanent social characteristics of

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<sup>1</sup> Greskovits, Béla. The political economy of protest and patience: East European and Latin American transformations compared.. Budapest: Central European University Press, 1998. PP. 69-92.

<sup>2</sup> Howard, Marc The Weakness of Civil Society in Post-Communist Europe: Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003.

<sup>3</sup> Opp, K.-D. Adverse living conditions, grievances, and political protest after communism: the example of East Germany. Social Forces, Vol. 79, No. 1. (Sep., 2000), pp. 29-65.

<sup>4</sup> Hirschman A. Shifting involvements. Princeton University Press. 2002. p.63

large strata. Specifically, inability to participate extensively in democratic procedures due to temporal economical hardship and identification decomposition is being translated into immanent traits of actual design of political institutions that suspend any grass-root civic activity. Institutionalization of low public participation tends to result in consolidation of non-participative, and even authoritarian regime, bolstered by the elites that strive to evade responsibility and rotation.

It appears that weakness of civil society and, specifically, inability of bulk of the population for autonomous collective action, on the one hand, and consolidation of authoritarian shift in the authority, on the other hand, are mutually dependent. Thus, disenfranchisement of economically deprived population is entrenched by emerging and transforming political institutions. Thus, even a significant economical growth is not likely to expand participation patterned as had been believed earlier<sup>5</sup>. Consequently, weakness of participation resources of extensive social groups in the course of transformational period threatens with emergence of the types of sustainable regimes where lack of “voice” options would be embedded.

In the overview of the major determinants of weakness of the grounds for collective action in today’s Russia I will consider two groups of factors.

Firstly, that is institutional design of political system and traditional role of the state that seeks to dominate and often suppress any type of civil activity.

Secondly, but not least importantly, we will consider the coincidence of socioeconomic shortcomings of certain social fractions and actual lack of organizational resources for collective action that contribute to consolidation of non-participative patterns is mass behavior.

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<sup>5</sup> Lipset, Easton and further.

### State monopoly on organization

Talking of the obstacles to collective action, especially protest, we shall consider effects coming from both conventional sides of this interaction: the authority and the respective contentious social group. The effects that shape the actual patterns of their interaction result from the wide range of characteristics of both. They may be described in the terms of political opportunity factors, embedded in the political system, on the one side, and the structural situation of the relevant social groups, on the other.

Tarrow<sup>6</sup> defines four most salient species of political opportunities for collective action as openness of access to power; shifting alignments inside the elites; availability of influential allies, and cleavages within and among the elites.

It is deeply enrooted in the Russian tradition that the balance between social, bottom-up initiatives and those top-bottom, organized by the state, is heavily biased towards the latter. The degree of this shift is so significant that the Russian society experiences a dramatic deficit of the basic mechanisms of horizontal integration which may have served as a mobilization base for collective action. In this respect the Russian society had not moved as far from the Soviet model as it is sometimes believed. Along the whole soviet period the state remained not only the source of legitimate violence, as any state, according to Weber, does, but also executed monopoly for organizational initiative and repressed any activity which was not sanctioned by the authorities. The evidence proves that the successor Russian state also tends to consider organized social action and competition as one of the major threats to its stability. The visible trend of the recent years is an ever developing closure of the authority to the external actors. Elite groups consistently constrain incorporation of new members, and the channels of upward mobility grow ever less transparent and meritocratic. Members of the elites owe their position and wealth not to the public recognition, but to the benevolence of the upper stratum, and may well loose it if appear non loyal enough to patron. The field of the open social competition and even of the very public discussion is shrinking dramatically. This

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<sup>6</sup> Tarrow S. States and opportunities in Comparative perspectives on social movements. P.54-56. in McAdam, D., McCarthy, J., Zald, M.N. (eds.) Comparative perspectives on social movements Cambridge University Press, 1996.

creates serious obstacles to representation of the interests of the groups not associated with those in power.

Specifically, the most evident obstacles to effective collective action in Russia are generated by low responsiveness of the system, weakness of mediating agents and state`s propensity for repression.

Low responsiveness<sup>7</sup>, that is inability to receive signals from the external actors (here – civil society) and answer them adequately, may be characterized as one of the basic properties of the traditional Russian authority. Saying traditional does not necessarily mean inevitable or irresolvable. One of the institutional factors, responsible for lack of ability to react to public expression, is the rigid centralization, which does not allow local authorities resolve minor conflicts in the phase of their initiation. Another one is weakness of legal order that makes citizens extremely dependant of particular will of man of office. This gives rise to corruption and exacerbates non-public, non-collective mechanism of decision making, prevents effective mobilization and articulation of claims by the groups.

Another disincentive for public mobilization is presented by lack of the independent agents that could contribute their resources or in other way mediate bargaining between social groups and the authority. As distribution of power between established elite groups grows less and less public, they are not interested in promoting open competition from which social groups could take advantage.

Notably, the discourse of “underrepresented” does not infer only low-resourced groups, but appears of current interest for the society in general, as the constitutional electoral mechanism becomes decorative and dissimulative. Consequently, political parties cease being the major mechanism of representation, and turn into one of the fractions of a closed ruling class. As had been mentioned above, local authorities are also excluded from public bargaining process and can not serve as mediators of collective actions. Since abolishment of local elections their linkage to the local citizens had been ultimately broken. The role of functional mediators of conflicts, i.e. the courts is also

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<sup>7</sup> Etzioni A. The Active Society. The Free Press, New York, 1968.

significantly weakened, since the division of powers cannot be provided under actual institutional design.

Apart from state-sponsored institutions, which are under zealous control of the authorities, the public and private spheres are experiencing unprecedented pressure that allow only for existence of actors that are loyal to the authorities. Thus, the independent resource-holders, like business, private TV channels or NGOs, especially those receiving foreign financing had been forced to cease their activity or become accountable to the state.

Not to be omitted are the means of control that are exercised by the state over society to achieve such a striking degree of intimidation. Rise to power of semi-military groups and secret service officers had influenced the general style of administration where the negotiating mechanism had been consistently substituted by enforcing one. Pressure and open violence is being applied to the actual and prospective contending agents, both through governmental agencies, like judicial or controlling bodies (fiscal, licensing etc.), and through the direct violence to demonstrators and activists.

### Weakness of collective action

According to few special studies and much more observable everyday social practice, the activist reaction towards both the most urgent political events and long-lasting hardships in Russia is particularly weak<sup>8</sup>. Notwithstanding widely diffused public discontent with many aspects of everyday life and governmental performance in relative areas<sup>9</sup>, the major form of response takes the shape of emotional burst that soon is succeeded by private discussion and is often shortly silenced<sup>10</sup>. The overwhelming majority of Russians never participate in any of the proposed activities: neither sign petitions, not take part in the meetings or support NGOs etc<sup>11</sup>. The only regular kind of activity the respondents report is voting. However this could not be considered at all a bottom up initiative, moreover when the mass parties are missing, and the character of power distribution grows less and less public. Under these circumstances electoral behavior loses its meaning of free political choice and becomes just a ritual. Paradoxically enough, common dissatisfaction with the state performance coincides with deep disbelief in non-governmental organizations<sup>12</sup>. They are considered ineffective in confronting the omnipotent state and/or acting in private interests of their activists<sup>13</sup>. I suggest that the failure of formation of broad solidarity base in the 1990ies under the atomizing influence of the dramatic increase in inequality prevented consolidation of viable civil society able of exerting effective control over authorities.

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<sup>8</sup> Marc Morjé Howard, *The Weakness of Civil Society in Post-Communist Europe*: Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003.

<sup>9</sup> Levada Yu. Chelovek nedovol'nyi: protest i terpenie. *Monitoring obschestvennogo mneniya*, 1999. №6(44), PP.7-13.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Назаров М.М. Политический протест: опыт эмпирического анализа. *СоциИс* 1995; №1  
Прочитировать цифры о неучастии из Howard, климов

<sup>12</sup> Levada Yu. Chelovek nedovol'nyi? *Vestnik obschestvennogo mneniya*. 2006. 5 (85), Marc Morjé Howard, *The Weakness of Civil Society in Post-Communist Europe*: Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003.

<sup>13</sup> Gudkov L. Den'gi i vlast' v obschestvennom mnenii rossiyan (odnomernost' predstavlenii o formah sotsial'nogo). *Vestnik obschestvennogo mneniya*. 2006. 3 (83).

Many researchers of social mobilization agree that forms and intensity of collective activity are determined by three main groups of factors. First, it is the degree and the type of discontent, that force people to associate for collective protection of their interests. Secondly, there are the means (or resources) that they possess and are able to mobilize for this common action, including education, communication skills, space, time and the material resource, etc. And, finally, there are the external circumstances, general political, institutional, and cultural (including discursive) context of the mobilization and action framing.

From the point of view of the relative deprivation theory, the protest in Russia has a huge potential. A significant part of the population is poor: even according to the internal, quiet conservative standards from 30 to 50% experience difficulties with obtaining some of the most important things, including adequate nutrition.<sup>14</sup> Large share of the new Russian poor poverty appears as a novel state, where they fell in course of radical transformations that followed dissolution of the USSR. Clearly, the inequality existed in the Soviet times; too; however it was not that dramatic and widely-spread. The state-sponsored socialization system ensured the uniform social integration and guaranteed a minimal living standard even to the poorest.

The distinctive feature of the post-soviet poor is that many of them originate from quiet well-being strata, in no aspect different from the millions of others in the Soviet times<sup>15</sup>. Not infrequently, the discrepancy between the impoverished and the prosperous through the reforms was not pre-determined by any specific factors, but often by the simple coincidence – unfavorable for the former and lucky for the latter. The lack of palpable grounds for failure leads often to its explanation in individual terms, not by the social factors, that presents a significant obstacle for effective mobilization<sup>16</sup>. However, even the sense of injustice and blaming the authorities is too vague and does not create

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<sup>14</sup> World bank. Poverty Assessment Report on Russia. 2006.

<sup>15</sup> Tihonova N.E. Fenomen sotsial'noi eksklyuzii v usloviyah Rossiyu Mir Rossii. 2003. №1.

<sup>16</sup> Javeline, Debra The Role of Blame in Collective Action: Evidence from Russia. The American Political Science Review, Vol. 97, No. 1. (Feb., 2003), pp. 107-121.

ground for mobilization and collective action<sup>17</sup>. The discontent remains predominantly in emotional diffuse forms. Another distinctive feature of the post-soviet poverty is the disproportional depression of the social resource of the poor. The point is that the state of poverty, due to its novelty had been accompanied by the loss of the significant social ties that create the important channel not only of interpersonal communication, but also of material and even career advancement. At the same time, the frustration from the decline of the social status and reluctance to associate oneself with the poor prevents the deprived from creating new social linkages with those of their actual position. Moreover, the wreckage of the preceding system of communication and cultural consumption strengthens dissocializing impact of the fall in status. As the state had been dropping its social programs, the deprived groups had been losing access to the previously provided means of integration, decent primary and free higher education, cheap mass media, theatres, cinema, travel etc. Thus, additionally to the hardships of material poverty and relevant shortage of necessary services like healthcare, the poor experience further limitation of accessing to the means of integration that could have compensated, at least partly, the scarcity of tangible resources group association and mobilization.

The analysis of the sources of deprivation and exclusion might constitute a distinctive research problem as it determines the dynamics of emergence and development of the stratum that possesses minor participation resources and exposed to the risk of conservation of their disenfranchised state. A specific character of the Russian derivation lies in its diffuse manner, its embeddedness in the social and political systems. Thus, the problem of exclusion and the risks of the lowered social effectiveness is transformed into the problem of fragility of the individual social status. In general, this weakens solidarity and prevents the relatively well-off groups from providing help to those who already find themselves in precarious situation.

One of the factors that contain social and economic development in Russia and hinders internal mobility is the territorial principal of provision of social policies. Due to the rule of obligatory registration in the place of actual residence, which is in fact is hard

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<sup>17</sup> Levada Yu. Chelovek nedovol'nyi? Vestnik obschestvennogo mneniya. 2006. 5 (85).

to obtain legally, the millions of Russian citizens experience restrictions of their rights if living outside of their home region. They experience severe difficulties in receiving basic social goods, like due subsidies, free healthcare, education, legal employment, they can not account on the defense of law. Obviously, such a semi-illegal status prevents them from any forms of public activity that may get them exposed to the authorities. Hereby, we again arrive to the fundamental problems of national institutional design, role of the state in the society, and institutional guaranties for human rights reinforcement. The salient obstacle for the battle on exclusion in Russia is the formal presence of the most of the rights, but lack of functioning channels for their fulfillment. Given the lack of mediating actors in the game (like courts and the media) it is extremely difficult to articulate claims and suggest the measures that would ensure the provision of the rights guaranteed by law, not to mention their expansion.

The discourse of the social exclusion and social deficits would be missing important determinants if we omit the situation of the more well-off groups of the society. The opportunities for the collective action even of the relatively well-to-do groups are seriously limited by the very design of the political system and role that the collective initiatives are given. Emergence of the missing civil institutions is prevented by the fragility of the status even of the relatively highly resourced individuals, which they risk to lose if get into confrontation with the state. They may not account in their protection neither on the dysfunctional and authority-dependant juridical system, nor on the powerful independent actors.

Hereby, both well-to-do and the deprived groups, appear unwilling or unable to carry out any collective action, but rather rest upon non-public, and predominantly individual social tactics. The former – because they can afford bypassing dissatisfactory governmental policies, and ensure self-provision of necessary social services; the latter just can not afford the mobilization and are constrained to patience.

## Conclusions

The significant obstacles to the public initiatives` development are presented by the path dependency patterns of traditional low responsiveness of the Russian state, the lenthitude and ineffectiveness of the enormous bureaucratic machinery. Often the only effective way to ensure the timely achievement of the goods guaranteed by law is the particular, non-public action, non-collective by definition. This interaction may take the shape of friendship ties, corruption or the plentitude of the forms in between. Notably, special effort is often required not for obtaining some extra benefits, but only ensuring those guaranteed by law. In this manner, those who possess some resources would rather use them in order to protect themselves from the excessive exposure to the state system. This, in vicious circle, consolidates ineffectiveness and corruption and deprives weaker groups from adequate public service. The dysfunction of the mediating actors like court, and the ever declining role of the media and NGOs contribute to the significant increase in the meaning of material resources and important “acquaintances” for individual’s ability to interact effectively with the state and other agents. Characteristic of the recent years is the sharp decline in the influence of the social and political actors whose resources lie outside of the state’s domain. Therefore the collective action of the weakly resourced actors can not account on the support of the powerful allies<sup>18</sup>. As a result of strong centralization and the abolishment of the regional elections, the local authorities are no more responsible to the citizens, but only to the upper level of bureaucratic hierarchy. They are deprived from the means of preventive conflict resolution that leads to senselessness of any protest actions other than the really large-scale ones, threatening with significant destabilization. However, most of the social actors do not possess the sufficient amount of resources, neither material, nor organizational, to mobilize the action of such caliber. Neither can they satisfy the most indispensable condition of successful mobilization – a comprehensive framing of a positive action perspective and social development program.

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<sup>18</sup> Klimov I.A. Shahtery v «rel'sovoi voine»: sub'ekt sotsial'nogo deistviya ili ob'ekt manipulyatsii? Mir Rossii. 1999. №3. 133-152.

In the absence of material and social resources for particularistic impact on the authority, the deprived social groups are left the only way to ensure consideration of their claims – through the scale disruptive action that threatens the integrity of the political and economical system, which it could not ignore<sup>19</sup>. Such a perspective presents several types of hazards for social security and peace, not to mention that it is doubtfully effective for achieving of the adequate institutionalized representation of the initiating groups` interests.

Firstly, the mass protest movement that could be mobilized in the conditions of the lack of differentiated horizontal ties, would inevitably be of negative and disruptive nature and could not be effective for constructive resolution of the social problems that gave it rise, but could only result in wholesale destruction of the non-reformable non-responsible system. The groups deprived from the effective mechanisms of collective self-identification and inter-group discussions are unable to develop the culture of social communication with the allies, of distinction and reconciliation of the interests. The persistence of the obstacles to group differentiation and interests representations creates a powerful and dangerous agent of mass protest. It comes into action only under extremely high grievances, is very weakly structured, and consequently weakly effective as an agent of policy making process.

Secondly, the massive poorly organized movement, led by controversial interest would very probably acquire destructive and violent character, which inevitably would cause the retaliatory (or preventive) governmental violence and provoke conflict escalation and scale repressions.

And finally, the mass mobilization of negative nature would probably be consolidated around conservative or even reactionary ideas. Suppression of public discussion and lack of the culture of resolution of inter-group tensions results to suppressing and concealing the development of the conflicts that may unexpectedly break through provoked by the larger social crisis. Visible support for this suggestion is

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<sup>19</sup> For example, miners` protests (rail wars) of the 1990s, and pensioners` movement against “monetization” of social benefits in 2005.

provided by further extension of xenophobic and anti-immigrant attitudes, which develop consistently with shrinking of space for public discussion and forms of positive differentiation of interests<sup>20</sup>. It is also probable that the groups lacking developed system of internal cohesion would employ the mechanisms of negative mobilization, moreover that this mechanism is frequently trained by the authorities for their proper legitimization and consolidation of public support for governmental policies.

The considerations discussed above demonstrate that the mass economical deprivation, and, even more importantly, the social and political deprivation that accompanies it, present a significant obstacle for sustainable development of a democratic political system. Moreover, enduring powerlessness and lack of representation contribute to conservation of non-responsive structures. Continuous deprivation from the mechanisms of political integration appears to impede the development of solidarity between social groups and expound inclusive political discussion. The community lacking these integrating mechanisms is subject to non-differentiated mass attitudes and is extremely vulnerable to campaigns of negative mass mobilization<sup>21</sup> and manipulative countermovements<sup>22</sup>.

Needless to say that the interests of the poor are non likely to be represented adequately unless the major institutional barriers for public discussion and independent actors` activity would not be removed. The current trend, however, is directed towards

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<sup>20</sup> Leonova A. Cultural and Political Determinants of Nationalism in Post-Soviet Russia: 1994-2006 in Laruelle M. (ed.) *Nationalism in Contemporary Russia*, Washington (to be published in 2008) (earlier Russian version Leonova A. *Nastroeniya ksenofobii i elektoral'nye predpochteniya v Rossii v 1994-2003* ["Xenophobic attitudes and voting preferences in Russia in 1994-2003"] in *Vestnik obschestvennogo mneniya* [Public Opinion Herald] №4 (72), 2004. P.83-91.)

<sup>21</sup> Gudkov L. D. Fenomen negativnoi mobilizatsii // *Obschestvennye nauki i sovremennost'*. 2005. №76. S. 46–57.

<sup>22</sup> Since the beginning of 2000s, there had been organized several pro-governmental "youth movements" that were designed to imitate grass-activity and demonstrate public support to the president's course («Idushie vmeste» ("The walking together"), "Nashi" ("Our guys"), "Mestnie" ("The locals"), "Molodaya Gvardia" ("Young guard") etc.), and, at the same time, impede mobilization and oppress really oppositional movements (NBP, leftist and antifa groups).

further restrictions on the independent social action. Though extensive development of state-sponsored false-“collective” movements are able to defuse temporally some of the most urgent issues, the deprived groups still remain void of viable mechanisms of articulating and claiming their interests. Persistence of patron-client patterns of relations leaves the society in general deprived from the essential means for expressing their attitudes and gaining adequate representation in the decision-making bodies.

Notwithstanding the rise of macroeconomical indicators of development, the Russian society does not experience any extension of political liberties, which is contrary to the well-known statement of modernization theory. Just on the opposite – the accumulation of material resources is consolidation the repressive trend in Russian politics, and permits ignoring other actors` claims, both internal and foreign. It is likely that Russia represents an up-and-coming case for the rising field of sustainable autocracy research<sup>23</sup>.

Getting over the current inability of the major groups of the society to represent their interests in front of the authorities and ensuring parity participation to the decision making requires comprehensive institutional reforms, mainly concerning the law enforcement institutions and safeguarding the action ability of non-state associated agents. Alternatively, the collective action is likely to be preserved in those marginal and overly uninfluential forms that are incapable of exerting any notable impact on policies developed.

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<sup>23</sup> Bueno de Mesquita B., Downs G.W. Development and Democracy in *From Foreign Affairs*, September/October 2005