

25 Years On: The Development of Health and Welfare NGOs in the BEARR Region

Friday, 11 November 2016

This was a very happy occasion: the BEARR Trust is still going strong after 25 years, with renewed vigour, as are many of its partners in the region, and the conference brought together old friends as well as new contacts. The day's programme involved speakers from no fewer than five of the twelve countries of the region in which BEARR operates, and from NGOs which themselves had survived for many years, through difficult times as well as easy ones.



Robert Brinkley, Chairman of the BEARR Trust, opening the conference, welcomed old friends and new and highlighted the major changes in the conditions in which NGOs in the region are working now compared with a quarter of a century earlier. Their relations with the authorities and with external donors have evolved and new methods and technologies are at their disposal. Populations have new understandings and expectations of the role of NGOs, and volunteering has developed all over the region. The BEARR Trust is in good shape, he informed participants, and has secured new funding. He recommended reading the anniversary issue of the Newsletter, and expressed warm thanks to the trustees and volunteers for their work.

Session 1 - overview

Dr Eleanor Bindman, of Queen Mary University, London, explained that her current research deals with outsourcing of social services in Russia. Her presentation described the current situation for health and social welfare NGOs in the region, levels of trust of the population in them, and their interaction with the state. Looking back, she noted that in the early 1990s, NGOs did not even call themselves by that name, and were mainly volunteering organisations, concentrating on the environment, ancient buildings, and human rights. Fairly soon, foreign donors - state entities and INGOs - came on the scene, supporting the embryonic civil society to strengthen democracy and NGOs' independence of the state. At that time NGOs concentrated on topics of interest to the donors – the environment, human rights and women's rights. In the late 1990s there was consolidation and a large expansion of NGO activity, greater professionalism and inter-sectoral cooperation.

From the early 2000s, the state began to pay more attention to civil society organisations, not all of it welcome. The adoption of the Foreign Agents' Law (FAL) in Russia caused great concern, but its real effects have yet to be fully assessed. Its implementation has varied from region to region, and while it has been deployed mostly against NGOs dealing with human rights, it is not yet clear whether it will affect social NGOs, which are, on paper at least, exempt from the law's effects. In Russia it has definitely been detrimental: it seems as though it is now possible to be politically active, or socially, but not both. A similar law was adopted in Kazakhstan, and one narrowly failed to be adopted in Kyrgyzstan.

Nevertheless, new ways of working and funding sources are developing, helping to compensate for the loss of foreign funding; these include crowdfunding, social enterprises, volunteering, social media and direct donations, including in response to television appeals. These are often used to raise funds for children needing medical treatment abroad, and have been very effective.

In Ukraine the crisis in 2014 led to civil society playing a key role in the EuroMaidan protests and coordinating conflict relief efforts through a major increase in volunteering and donations to army and other causes. There has also been increased interest from international donors in funding good governance and civil society development projects.

An area highlighted by Dr Bindman was low public trust in NGOs; in Russia only 38% of the people trust it, while in Ukraine it is higher. Attitudes persist in Russia that civil society should support the state and not oppose it or offer an alternative view. This might change, however, now that NGOs are being encouraged to partner the state in providing services. This is a very formal process, with direct state funding, often a welcome source of money for NGOs. It could also offer opportunities for NGOs to influence the way state-provided services are organised and lead to reforms in the social sector, and improved professionalism. Early signs are that so far recipients of services tend to choose the state providers over NGOs. This could change, however.



Elena Topoleva, Director of the Agency for Social Information in Moscow, and an old friend of BEARR, spoke about civil society and the state in Russia.



She herself is a member of the Public Chamber, the main body for interface between civil society and the state. She said that while the Ministry of Justice estimates the number of NGOs in Russia in the hundreds of thousands, really not more than 70,000 are active. Almost 80% of the population know of NGOs active in their area, and about 16% have themselves been involved in the voluntary sector. Attitudes in the political elite to the contribution of NGOs to social welfare have become more positive in the past few years, with 48% assessing their role as good or satisfactory in 2015 compared with only 33% in 2008. And since 2010 volunteering has become very popular among Russian citizens: 34% of people have experience of volunteering. The Sochi Olympic Games and large-scale bush fires a few years before were notable spurs to volunteering.

The scope and range of NGO activity has changed, and while many are concerned with children, recently the number providing help to older people has grown significantly. Recent data show that in 2015 50% of the population donated to NGOs, often via text messages in TV shows. Donation to individuals in need is more popular than giving to NGOs, because of the lack of trust and fear of corruption. Nowadays there are tax incentives for charitable giving. There are 20 big foundations funded privately with a total budget of around £6 million annually. This is not a lot in a country of the size of Russia, but it is a beginning. Importantly, there are new ways in which NGOs can work with government bodies and, it is hoped, use these links to influence policy. One such mechanism is called “Open Government”; another is the public councils set up under recent legislation which take part in public scrutiny of state institutions. Many NGOs are now involved in this, including in prisons.

Russian NGOs have moved from international support to domestic sources, with more and more NGOs involved in provision of social services, compensated for this work from regional budgets. The Foreign Agents Law was a catalyst in this, but Ms Topoleva said there were grounds to hope that enlightened senior figures in the country have understood what damage the Law has done and might seek change.

After this wide-ranging introduction, both speakers answered questions. Ms Topoleva confirmed that the economic crisis has negatively affected donations to NGOs, and that there are some GONGOs (government-organised NGOs). As to the identity of NGOs, they feel themselves to be advocates for vulnerable groups rather than in opposition to the state. NGOs engaging in the social welfare field are supposed to be exempt from the FAL, even if they engage in “political activity” such as lobbying, but they are still affected by it. Most have ceased to receive foreign funding, for example, and find it difficult to secure new, domestic funding. Human rights NGOs have much less prominence than some years ago. Those of them who were getting foreign funds and were forced to register as foreign agents are shut out from cooperation with the state.

It was pointed out that self-censorship has crept in, with NGOs stopping certain activities without having been required to under the new legislation. Various factors lay behind the lack of trust, which persists after all these years: partly it is due to low levels of trust in any institution in Russia, partly traditional distrust of non-state activity in general, concern about corruption, and traditional dependence on the state for social protection.

Session 2 – “staying the course” looked at how NGOs had survived and evolved over the years. We heard from speakers from Belarus and Russia, both of them long-term activists in their NGOs, and in their talks they demonstrated their enormous tenacity and determination.



Anna Garchakova, of the Belarusian Children’s Hospice in Minsk – the first such hospice to be set up in the former Soviet Union, described how she got involved. A biochemist by training, she found herself doing something completely different in the Perestroika years of the late 1980s, when there were no rules, anything was possible and she became a clinical psychologist. At that time 64% of children with leukaemia died. A children’s hospital was turned into a hospice, taking in children from all over Belarus and Russia too. Pain control was not a subject studied in the USSR, so she went to the US for a course in this. All the hospice’s funding came from abroad, and it provided day care at first. Palliative care had not been heard of in 1994, so this was a pilot programme. Having started with four staff members, it grew, and developed other activities, such as a bereavement programme for parents, volunteering, and after it got its own building for the first time in 2003, started training people in palliative care. It now has 32 staff and this year got a brand new building. There is a palliative care centre with all of its funding from the state.

Next, **Arkady Tyurin**, Director of Put Domoj in St Peterburg, told us how ten years ago, having been homeless himself, he was advised to contact the BEAR Trust for help with his street newspaper, Put Domoj (The Way Home). The NGO he is involved with is called New Social Solutions, and works with homeless people and drug addicts. Their watchword is “Together”, and they seek to help people earn honest money, as partners rather than beneficiaries. The newspaper started up 22 years ago. The project has helped homeless people get registered and thus become eligible for healthcare, having been illegal residents in most cases. It arranges funerals, so that homeless people have their names on their tombstone, rather than a number which the state would give them. A studio was set up and film-making led to involvement in an international homeless people’s film festival, then also football, and participation in the Homeless World Cup. Twenty teams from Russia competed in this. The NGO still needs grants, but refused money from a would-be donor who wanted to play football with them for fun. It’s not about fun, he said, but about giving people a sense of worth. If the partners have a criminal record that is not problem. From a one-room operation, there are now 200 volunteers, 50 writers, and 20 vendors, part of a network of street newspapers around the world.



In the discussion, Ms Garchakova explained the challenges to NGO work: there is strict regulation of civil society in Belarus and to charitable giving. Companies that donate are subject to constant checks. Most of the funding for the hospice now comes from inside Belarus. But this year, the government shut down the donation phone line, all donations now have to go through the Ministry of Economics, and foreign funding is liable to tax. Arkady Tyurin said that public attitudes to homeless people have softened over the past ten years. The budget all comes from domestic sources, with only project money from donors like the BEARR Trust. He would like to move into legal services - relations between homeless people and the police are varied. Some police officers are better than others. All vendors have a badge with Mr Tyurin’s phone number on it. He would also like to be able to share experience with others, as opposed to training.

Session 3 – “embracing change” looked at how civil society is adapting and using new methods. **Anna Bitova**, from the Center for Curative Pedagogics in Moscow, described how the Center developed alternative ways of looking after children with learning difficulties. Its main role is supporting families. The Center was completely independent and until ten years ago received no state aid. Now 13% of its funds come from the state. Despite the low level of support from the state, she is expected to share her expertise with state organisations for

nothing, and calls for advice come frequently. For example, in 2013 they were asked by the government to inspect seven institutions for children with disabilities.



There has been progress, as Ms Bitova's slides showed. Now state institutions (internats) are more numerous, but smaller. There are fewer children of pre-school age in such homes, and many more than before get schooling. In the past, the homes had simply used the curriculum for pre-school children with teenagers, which was totally inappropriate. Teachers from other schools come in to provide variety in education, and they help to press for change. Other changes for the better are that individual children have their own clothes and toys, they are allowed to take cuddly toys to bed with them (this was previously forbidden), and the practice of sending them to hospital frequently – to make the life of the staff easier – has been reduced. Many children are able to go on a summer holiday in the countryside, while in past years none of them did.

There is still much more to be done. The state provides no respite care for parents, even though caring for children at home costs the state far less than keeping them in an institution. Adoption of children with Down's Syndrome has become quite common, but there is a shortage of foster carers for children with disabilities. Staff caring for such children need better training. More small units are needed, and there are insufficient spectacles and hearing aids. Attitudes still need to change. On the plus side as well, though, the new law on children's internats is good. And parents are taking matters into their own hands. Ms Bitova showed a video about a small boy, Maxim, with multiple disabilities. His mother had been advised not to keep the child when he was born, but had insisted, and did her utmost to overcome the obstacles in her way. A resourceful woman, she scoured the internet for information and help, and manages to get to the Center with her child despite a really difficult journey from outside Moscow. He is making good progress.

The next speaker was **Nino Dvalidze**, Vice Rector of Ilia University in Tbilisi, and Director of its Child Development Unit.



She spoke about programmes focussing on early intervention, and new donor paradigms – social entrepreneurship is growing, with many start-ups, aiming to make a profit while bringing about innovative and long-term, sustainable change. International donors are enthusiastic about these start-ups, which need good business plans and also to ensure they do not allow profit-seeking to displace their social focus. So far 72% of social enterprises are in Tbilisi, but community centres are appearing in the poorer regions of the country. Funds are still very limited, and human resources are scarce in the countryside. Social responsibility is not yet part of the culture in Georgia. In the Q and A time, it was acknowledged that outside major cities in both Russia and Georgia there is very little help for parents of children with disabilities, and legislation against discrimination is not enforced. But parents use social media to find help and set up pressure groups, and television now raises these issues.

In **Session 4** we continued the discussion of **new formats**, this time in Central Asia and Ukraine. **Charles Buxton** of INTRAC spoke about social enterprises in Kyrgyzstan and developments in Central Asia in general. He wondered whether social enterprise was the last chance for civil society in the region, given that weak economies mean funding is scarce, NGO staff leave for jobs in government or business, and governments are setting up GONGOs. The Kyrgyzstan government's attempt to introduce a foreign agents law had damaged trust in NGOs, and linking NGO activity to business affects the image of NGOs. Other Central Asian states are worse off: in Turkmenistan civil society is banned, and in Tajikistan the situation is so fragile that the most NGOs can do is try to maintain their social identity. Many people have left NGOs due to the lack of funding. Ideologically, moving into profit-making activity can erode the independence of the organisation, and it is very demanding of an NGO manager already struggling to keep the NGO afloat. Many NGOs in Kyrgyzstan are looking for a business angle in the interests of longer-term sustainability. They need to link up with large business to secure start-up funding. Other possible models are cooperatives and microcredit.



INTRAC is a social enterprise (SE) as 85% of its funds come from contracts, not donations, and it has partnered a German donor in a range of activities, such as a women's bakery and a taxi service for people with disabilities. NGOs can become part NGO and part SE or fully SE. Public-private partnerships are also possible now. Among the challenges facing SEs are how to manage accounting when they have a dual role (NGO and SE) and the same manager is in charge of both. Mr Buxton mentioned activism to promote the rights of Central Asian migrants in Russia. Back home the migrants are influential, because of their remittances and the fact that they vote.

Following this presentation **Yaroslav Minkin** of STAN gave an entertaining and autobiographical exposition of the evolution of civil society in Ukraine since late Soviet times.



His own multiple identities, including Russian and Jewish and as a patriotic Ukrainian, living in Crimea and Luhansk in the Donbas and now in Ivano-Frankivsk in West Ukraine, lent themselves to much experimentation with protest, through rock, punk, art, and poetry. Civil society in Ukraine has had major surges, up to 2004 it was quite weak, but then came the Orange Revolution, when NGOs became active and organised, up to 2013, when the Euro-Maidan protests broke out. The third wave, since 2014, has involved a surge in volunteering, and new initiatives from people who have lived outside Ukraine. As well as political protest,

during the 2000s civil society took up issues such as health, and since the Maidan and the conflict in the East, his NGO is involved with reconciliation inside the country and with people in Russia, support for IDPs, and diversity – both visible and invisible minorities. It aims at promoting change rather than just helping. Mr Minkin said he wanted INGOs to do more in Ukraine's villages. He had doubts about setting up SEs there as he thought local government would take control of them.

BEARR Trustee **Nicola Ramsden** wound up the day, reminding us that the success of governments in the region depends on their ability to provide for the health and social welfare needs of their people. Whether they promote and involve civil society will play a role in that success.



The key theme of the day's discussion, she said, had been the interaction between state and civil society. They need each other, with NGOs short of funds and the state less able to budget for the services needed. In Russia, state reliance on NGOs might be taking over from state intervention in the form of the Foreign Agents' Law. Despite setbacks, many developments – such as discussion of former taboo subjects like disability; activism rather than pity; volunteering; greater trust in NGOs – are unlikely to be reversed. NGOs have shown their ability to stay the course, fight for their cause, build bridges and...survive. Over the next 25 years there will be more change: social enterprises will develop, and will cooperate with the state, hopefully while maintaining their identity. We saw during the conference that they can do both.