

**THE ROLES OF POLITICAL PARTIES AND TRADE
UNIONS IN SOCIAL POLICY FORMULATION IN
RUSSIA'S REGIONS**

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Executive Summary

The Working Paper assesses the roles of regional political parties and social sector trade unions in social policy formulation, based on twenty interviews in Tula and Samara Regions and the Chuvash Republic during 2004. We conclude that parties' influence has been weakened by the centralization of power within party organizations and in the presidential administration; the absence of a coherent governmental social policy; the increasing homogenization of parties' social policy programs; and the dominance of United Russia. Cooperation of parties with NGOs focuses around pre-election campaigns rather than more sustained cooperation. Social sector trade unions articulate their members' grievances, particularly low wages and wage arrears. However, relations of unions with administrative authorities tend to be clientelistic. Union representatives participate in policy deliberations, but their influence is weak. Unions' links with parties are largely pragmatic rather than programmatic alliances. Neither parties nor unions in the regions examined played a strong role as mediating or representative organizations.

Introduction

The first two Working Papers for this project reported on Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) in the three regions where we conducted field work, Tula and Samara Regions and the Chuvash Republic. The current paper reports on twenty interviews with leaders of regional branches of parliamentary political parties and social sector trade unions. Interviews were conducted with representatives of the Liberal Democratic Party of Russia (LDPR), the Communist Party of the Russian Federation (CPRF), and Rodina in all three regions, with United Russia (UR) in two, and with Yabloko and the Union of Right Forces in one each. Thus, the largest and most important parties across the political spectrum, those strongly represented in current and past Dumas, were included. Questions focused on the functions and role of parties as institutions that mediate, translate, and actualize the interests of society, of separate groups and strata, in the policy process. Leaders of trade unions in the educational, health, and social service sectors were also interviewed about their functions and political influence. The report focuses first on parties, then on unions, and concludes with an assessment of their roles in social sector policy formulation.

Regional Political Parties

A number of common themes emerged from the interviews. First, the dominance of UR after the 1999, and especially after the 2003, Duma elections has rendered all other parties ‘oppositional,’ and further marginalized them in the political process. Secondly, the growing centralization of power, both within party organizations and in the presidential administration, has increasingly circumscribed the role of regional parties. Thirdly, most parties report an absence of coherent social policy from the central government. At the same time, social policy and

programmatic differentiation among the parties themselves have decreased, and programs take on more and more a 'declarative' character. Finally, reports on relations with NGOs re-affirm the conclusion from the NGO interviews, that cooperation with parties is focused mainly around pre-election campaigns rather than more institutionalized efforts at collaboration. (see Reports #1 and 2 to the National Council on this project.)

Especially at the regional level there is a tangible sense that since the 1999 federal Duma election, the institution of multi-partism has been devalued. After the last (2003) federal Duma election, the pro-presidential UR formed a party-bureaucratic majority in the parliament, finally blocking legislative initiative from the right, which was already extremely weak, and the left. Interviews showed that, with the exception of United Russia, all the party organizations saw themselves as "oppositional." These parties had access neither to much political influence, nor to the administrative resources of executive power. Interviews showed a generally negative evaluation of the parties' possibilities for affecting the formation and realization of social policy at the regional level.

Different aspects of centralization have also circumscribed regional parties' influence. Interviews show that regional branches have little influence on the programmatic articulation of their parties' social policy. The 'social bloc' of parties' pre-election programs are formulated 'from the center.' Local initiative by party organizations in the electoral process is minimal, if it is present at all. For example, in the case of UR, discussion about regional aspects of social policy use the terms of the President – 'socially-oriented economy, socially-oriented business.' (Interview # 68) Another variant follows party discipline, subordinating the regional party to the federal. According to an LDPR deputy, for example, "Moscow says, we fulfill." (Interview # 42)

One major aspect of centralization relates to formulation of regional budgets. The possibilities for implementing social programs connected with the specifics of the region depend on control over financing of the social sphere. Putin-era administrative reforms, particularly the strengthening of the power ‘vertical,’ have led to a sharp narrowing of possibilities for legislative initiative at the regional level, including in formation of the local budget. According to an LDPR leader, “Now unification is literally all. If formerly there was some role for local councils, legislative councils, today this role is becoming extinct. . . Everywhere federal law is dominant, but each regions has its particularities. . . local conditions should be /taken into account/.” (Interview # 42) Even in regions where the governor has a more pro-democratic political orientation, the regional administration acts according to the logic of reporting to the ‘power vertical.’ The main promoters of this political process appear to be functionaries of UR, the one party that has access to administrative resources, and thus the possibility of receiving budget financing for social programs.

In the context of such growing centralization, party leaders’ evaluation of the social situation, both in the country and in the region, is significantly connected with their parties’ relation to the power structure. Regional representatives of UR, practically fully-identified with the federal center and its administrative-bureaucratic support locally, are generally positive. The majority of non-UR party representatives reported the absence of a coherent social policy coming from the political center. Most respondents agreed that there is practically no intelligible, consistent, worked-out and economically-guaranteed social policy. According to one regional CPRF deputy, speaking about the current state of central policy toward the social sphere and its finances, for example, “They do not think about this in the Center, they do not see where to direct it.” (Interview # 21) According to another party leader, “As to the ‘social bloc,’ the president, government, partly also the Duma only declare a social program. They do not have any social orientation. Mainly

there is not social policy, only conversation about it.” (Interview # 67) This criticism is generally not constructive or analytical, but couched in ideologically-tinged rhetoric. The focus of criticism is on the federal center, the “Kremlin,” the President and his circle, with much less attention to the Duma.

The interviews also confirmed an ongoing decline in the differences among parties’ programs and pre-election platforms on social policy. The majority of representatives of regional parties interviewed for the project said that the differences among parties had become insignificant. This process of loss of differentiation has been gradual. In the early elections, in 1993 and 1995, there was genuine positive and negative mobilization around reform and its social effects, and programmatic choice played a role in the act of voting. By 1999-2003 there was little such variation. According to one LDPR deputy, for example, “The ideas of all the parties are the same, especially at the local level.” (Interview # 42) Parties do not really work at developing the participation of particular social groups in the political process, problematizing and presenting their interests – i.e., performing the functions of mediating institutions.

While ‘opposition’ parties are generally skeptical about their possibilities for influencing social policy in the region, those interviewed agreed that the ‘social bloc’ is one of the central elements in parties’ pre-election programs and appeals. According to one respondent, “Any deputy who is not /politically/ suicidal . . . supports a socially-directed program which the mass media publicizes.” (Interview # 67) Thus, parties use their social policy as a means of mobilizing and attracting a potential electorate, but do not really set programmatic goals for their political activities between elections. The Communists position themselves as concerned mainly about the more unfortunate part of the population. The LDPR and Rodina rely on ideological criticisms of the

center expressed in national-populist and national-chauvinist ideology. These appeals mainly preserve dissatisfactions.

The majority of party representatives, speaking about their actual activism in the social sphere, say that they mainly give targeted social help, i.e., concrete material help to specific people or groups. With the exception of UR, these parties were not able to implement any kind of more-or-less significant social programs, because they lacked the necessary financial resources. According to one LDPR representative, for example, “Our regional organization stressed work with social organizations, direct work with the population, charitable acts. . . 700 people turned to us for help. We strive to help /but/ we cannot provide material help to all.” (Interview # 67)

Finally, these interviews confirmed the picture of parties’ relations with NGOs that came from our earlier-reported interviews with NGO leaders. Regional party representatives gave a general sense that parties saw NGOs not so much as partners or potential partners, but as competitors. Parties’ activities in the social sector were motivated largely by the struggle for a potential electorate, and took on a pragmatic character. Parties established contacts with non-governmental organizations that could provide support in election campaigns, could mobilize voters. This was, first of all, veterans’ and invalids’ organizations, ‘Afghantsy,’ ‘Chernobiltsy,’ etc.

Of all parties covered in the research we can distinguish only one, a branch of Rodina, which made an attempt at systematic and consistent work with NGOs on concrete social problems of the region’s population. It is significant that one of the leaders of this branch came into the party after having worked for many years in an NGO dedicated to invalids, and maintained close and active ties with this and other social organizations. According to him, “One of our election program declarations is cooperation with social organizations, with citizens in the localities. We work to create a social council that can be effective in maintaining mutual ties. We collect systematic

information, and take decisions on this basis, so that these interests are heard in the Duma, and our deputies defend these interests. Nobody takes responsibility. We decided to take it on ourselves.” (Interview # 65) But this is an exception. Generally, we can say that in the social sphere, party organizations engage mainly in charitable work, providing direct assistance to the needy. In their social activism, they are motivated mainly by publicity and electoral goals.

Social Sector Trade Unions

Trade unions currently within the structure of the Federation of Independent Trade Unions of Russia (FNPR) are the largest social organizations preserved from the Soviet period. According to the majority of experts, as a rule they do not fulfill their functions as institutions of civil society, do not provide representation of the interests or defend of the rights of labor. At the same time, they do have real significance for the authorities as a vast Federation-wide network of conformist mass social organizations, periodically demonstrating at least imitative activism in defense of rights. In practice their activities, established during the Soviet period, are preserved. At the end of the 1980s and beginning of the 1990s Russian trade unions went through a crisis of development, together with the authorities. But the directors and leaders of the unions succeeded in preserving the most important feature of the system— the dependent position of rank-and-file members on the leaderships of enterprises and institutions - which contributed to blocking independent activity in the economic and social sphere.¹

The results of our research for the most part confirm this general characterization, although the picture, it seems, is somewhat more complicated. It may be these findings are connected with the fact that only representatives of budget sector trade unions, those in education, health care, and

¹ “Civil society and political processes in the regions,” (Moscow, Carnegie Center, Material on Workers), No. 3, 2005, p. 14.

culture, participated in our survey. The situation of this group of employees, the low level of their wages and frequent wage arrears over many years, is one of the most actively-discussed topics in Russia. The protest activities of teachers and doctors have been the most frequent demonstration and strike movements in the country, although, as many specialists recognize, in the majority of cases they are not independent, but are coordinated by regional and local authorities and serve as instruments of their pressure on the center. Trade unions associated with the Federation of Independent Trade Unions, the successor of the Soviet-era union, appear to be the only type accepted by the authorities as instruments to represent the interests of workers. Alternative civil activism in this sphere is not supported or is suppressed. At the same time, the quality of alternative trade unions' activism is very varied. In many cases it stands for the interests not of workers, but of a narrow group of leaders.

It should be noted that, in all three regions which we investigated, FNPR-affiliated or "old" trade unions unconditionally predominate over the new. Their representatives, with the support of political and administrative authorities, are involved in all consultative mechanisms, "discussion squares," etc. In many cases development of new independent union structures has been consciously blocked, hampered by the old structures of the FNPR. According to one trade union representative, "We try to /work/ so that there won't be alternative unions. They are created not because they are needed, but often if someone wants to take revenge against someone else, to show his ambition. . . . They do not resolve any vital issues, but themselves create problems. . . . We simply explain that it is not for our members. Now, for example, there was an effort to create, more accurately to revive, a Council of Labor Collectives (CLC). It existed for a while, but it was not able to do anything. We explained to the workers that they could not work as effectively as we, that

they do not have any developed organizational structure that would allow them to defend themselves and to help others.” (Interview # 39)

In post-Soviet history, FNPR-affiliated trade unions from being marginalized protest organizations supporting the CPRF in early 1990s, to successful integration into the various structures of power such as the tripartite commissions, committees and commissions of legislative and executive organs, etc. According to one trade union representative, “In the leadership we have former Communists, accustomed to the old consciousness. But life changes. In the middle of the 1990s, when enterprises were in crisis, were not actually working (so no wages, no benefits), we were standing shoulder to shoulder on the meetings’ platforms. Since the enterprises started working, we are not interested any more in ‘rocking the boat.’ We are interested in increasing wages, paying off debts, etc.” (Interview # 39) In some cases the power of trade unions stabilized, they were incorporated into institutions’ power structures, and they did negotiate wage increases when institutions became profitable.

The interviews contain extensive information about traditional forms of trade union work, such as wage negotiations, regulation of conflicts on questions of dismissal, non-payment or arrears of wages, defense of rights and judicial processes, legal help to members of the unions, etc. They also inform about various institutionalized forms of cooperation of trade unions with administrative and legislative authorities. According to one representative of an educators’ trade union, “We work with the (Regional) Duma Committee on education. I am a member of the social commission of this committee. The commission is very active and efficient, . . . we conduct discussion circles, take legislative initiatives, take part in discussions of legal acts. Other contacts are with executive authorities. I am also a member of a commission under the Ministry of Education, a permanent organ, as a representative of the trade union. . . I am a member of the tripartite commission for labor

relations. Essentially, we work with the power structure, at meetings, to form a budget.” (Interview # 62) According to the representative of a health care union, “The Chairman of the regional committee (of the trade union of health care workers) is a member of the administration of the territorial fund for obligatory medical insurance, so that we have direct access to all documents which are created there, we constantly see and contribute to all proposals that interest us.”

(Interview # 63)

This and similar information from our interviews show that trade unions function as one of the constituent parts of an articulated bureaucratic machine. In some cases they obtain real successes in improving the situation of their members, but essentially by working with, correcting the inadequacies, filling in the defects in the work of the apparatus. “We write letters, make calculations. Thanks to us in the Duma there are not arrears with payments. We calculate norms for pay for the educational process, we press so that the money goes to the schools and the norms are fulfilled.” (Interview # 62)

Respondents also noted as evidence of their successes the establishment of social privileges or increase in wages for workers. These achievements unconditionally deserve a positive evaluation. They constitute more or less significant improvements, but they are achieved on the basis of what are mainly patron-client relationships. They can't be considered real civic activism, the resolution of systematic problems, serious reforms.

In many cases the presence of trade unions representatives in multiple committees and commissions gives them little influence in the actual decisions taken, while providing an image of consultation. Many trade union leaders fully realize this. According to one, “For social organizations there is danger in this. If I take part in the work of some sort of group, for example, made up of people who are under the Ministry of Education, it is complicated for me alone to

defend my opinion, they can easily ignore it. But, since I, as a representative of the union, take part in the work of the group, for public opinion it will look as if I share their ideas, I appear to share the responsibility for their decisions. I understand that for this they invite me to one or another meeting or for in work in some kind of group.” (Interview # 62)

All respondents representing trade unions, without exception, recognized the inability of their organizations, in current conditions, to resolve the main task - to achieve a level of wages for budget sector workers that corresponds to their labor expenditures and cost of living. Union representatives explain conformism in their interactions first of all by the inadequacy of their financial resources, which would be necessary to secure their independence. As one union representative stated the case, “Why are trade unions strong in the West? They can carry out strike movements. It is because of the strike fund, and the extended period that they can rely on this, without going to work. It allows them to make demands, to seek compromises. We do not have this possibility, we must simply seek compromises – with administrative powers, employers (Interview # 39) A similar point was made by another trade unionist, “The authorities have money. We can do only one thing – have a negotiation process and not do much harm. Like diplomats, so that we can move forward, and not slow down and move backward. For us the results are important, although we achieve the minimum.” (Interview # 62)

Unions and Political Parties

The interviews indicate that trade unions’ approach to choosing their political orientations and party allies is deeply pragmatic. Unions try to establish contacts with those parties that are powerful, influential, form the majority in regional legislatures, etc. According to the representative of an educators’ union, for example, “We are not on the right, not on the left, we only seek allies.”

(Interview # 18) According to a second, “We contact UR, turn to them so that they will support us in the district Duma in agreeing to various provisions for expenditures on health care.” (Interview # 63) Another also remarked that it was now necessary to work with UR. (Interview # 39)

The interviews also provide evidence that the electoral resources of trade unions are of interest to parties. According to one respondent from a health care trade union, “One should understand that today the really independent social organizations are the trade unions. All the other parties and social organizations, for example women’s, invalids’ Chernobiltsy – decide narrow questions. Therefore they /parties/ come to us at election time. We don’t refuse meetings. They all visit us before elections, show their face.” (Interview #17)

Finally, trade union representatives generally assert that workers underestimate the unions’ significance and role, because of inadequate information, or low legal culture, or short-sightedness. This was a general view expressed in the interviews. It may be said that this is part of the more general picture of relatively weak interest in the activities of social organizations, a low level of confidence in them, which is characteristic of contemporary Russia. Representatives of NGOs, in particular rights-defense organizations, also speak about this. (see Report # 2). Another factor is the attitude toward trade unions preserved from Soviet times – that they are primarily suppliers of certain social goods such as recreational services, etc., rather than institutions for the defense of labor rights.

Conclusion

This third report has examined the roles of political parties and social sector trade unions in social policy formulation for three regions of the Russian Federation, based on interviews with leaders of major political parties and unions. We conclude that several factors have weakened the

role of parties in policy formulation. The most significant are the centralization of power both within party organizations and in the presidential administration, the absence of a coherent social policy from the central government, the increasing homogenization of parties' social policy programs, and the dominance of United Russia in legislative politics and access to administrative resources. Cooperation of NGOs with parties is found to be focused mainly around pre-election campaigns; we found few efforts at more sustained cooperation.

Social sector trade unions have made some efforts to articulate their members' needs. The social sector is especially beset by comparatively low wages, a history of wage arrears, and strike activism. However, the only unions accepted by political authorities are those associated with the successor FNPR, and this federation generally seeks benefits through clientelistic links with political and administrative authorities rather than through genuine social activism. Union representatives often do participate in the policy process, but their influence is generally not great. Unions' links with political parties are largely pragmatic rather than programmatic alliances. Overall, neither parties nor unions in the regions examined played a strong role as mediating or representative organizations.

**LIST OF INTERVIEWS WITH REPRESENTATIVES
OF REGIONAL BRANCHES OF POLITICAL PARTIES
AND SOCIAL SECTOR TRADE UNIONS**

Interviews were conducted in the city of Samara, Samara Region, December 14-16, 2004; in the city of Cheboksary, Chuvash Republic, November 24-26, 2004; and in the city of Tula, Tula Region, March 15-19, 2004.

Interviews with Representatives of Regional Branches of Political Parties

- # 9 City Organization of the Union of Right Forces (URF), interview with Leader
- #20 Regional Branch of LDPR, interview with Leader
- #21 Regional Branch of CPRF, interview with Leader
- #22 Regional Branch of the bloc "Rodina," interview with Leader
- #23 Regional Branch of "United Russia," interview with Leader

- #41 Regional Branch of the party "Rodina," interview with Leader and Group Discussion
- #42 Regional Branch of LDPR, interview with deputy of regional legislature and member
Or the Coordinating Committee of the LDPR's Regional Branch
- #43 CPRF, interview with Secretary of Party Committee

- #64 Oblast Branch of CPRF, interview with Second Secretary
- #65 Regional Branch of the Party "Rodina," interview with Chairperson of Politburo
- #66 Regional Branch of the Party "Yabloko," interview with Member of the Auditing
Commission
- #67 Regional Branch of the LDPR, interview with Deputy Coordinator
- #68 Regional Department of the Party "United Russia," interview with Leader

Interviews with Representatives of Social Sector Trade Unions

- #16 Oblast Committee of the Trade Union of Cultural Workers, interview with Leader and group
discussion
- #17 Oblast Committee of the Trade Union of Health Care Workers, interview with Leader and
group discussion
- #18 Oblast Committee of the Trade Union of Education and Scientific Workers, individual
interview with Chairperson
- #19 Oblast Committee of the Trade Unions of Workers in Governmental Institutions
and Social Services, interview with Leader and Group Discussion

- #39 Joint Organization of Trade Unions, interview with Chairperson
- #40 Trade Union of Education and Scientific Workers, interview with Chairperson

- #62 Oblast Trade Union of Education Workers, interview with Chairperson
- #63 Oblast Committee of the Trade Union of Healthcare Workers, interview with Chairperson