What Can Be Learned from Russia’s Experience: Grassroots Authoritarianism and Grassroots Democracy in Specialized Cities

The failure of Russia’s democratic transformation inevitably produces a need of examining the factors that cause the current situation. As it seems, this is resulted, among others, from the characteristics of Russia’s urban network. While 73.86% out of the total population of Russia are currently urban dwellers, 619 out of the total number of 1100 Russian cities and towns present the legacy of the mono-structural socialist economy. Under state socialism they were developed as single-enterprise cities where 30% or more of the population was employed in one enterprise. In post-Soviet era, however, these cities were hit hardest by the rapid and chaotic capitalization, because their economies were based on a single industry. It seems likely that, alongside the dramatic economic downturn, they experience the crisis of a culture of ‘job for life’. Under state socialism this culture was underpinned by state-owned mono-industries as large paternalistic employers embedded in hierarchical organization model that left local dwellers with little capacity for action. As a result, the idea of dependence on the decisions, which are made merely in the capital city of Moscow by a strong authoritarian leader, is still deeply rooted in the perceptions of local dwellers. These socio-psychological preconditions have produced the predominant set of social norms which foster strict informal instruments of social influence and social control based on the widespread positive attitudes towards authoritarian submission resulted from government in hierarchies, ultra-conservatism, intolerance and hostility towards ‘strangers’ within the city. This set of attitudes towards policy-making may be likely described as grassroots authoritarianism, which finally determined the scenario of the development of Russia at the beginning of the 21st century.

It is not possible, however, to regard the mono-industrial city as a distinctly ‘Russian’ (or, in a broader sense, (post-) socialist phenomenon. Instead, it may be examined as a subtype of a ‘specialized city’, meaning a city that is specialized in certain activities. However, the main
difference is that the specialized cities under state socialism had a strong support by the government for their development and that the support was mainly due to political reasons. Therefore, in many respect, post-socialist mono-industrial cities face the problems similar to those increasingly challenging the development of specialized cities in most developed countries, such as, for example, Detroit in the USA. Consequently, the need of diversifying the local economy cannot be regarded merely as a problem of post-socialist cities. However, the difficult task of diversifying the specialized economy cannot be successfully performed merely in terms of purely monetary methods; it is not possible without the widespread attitudes which may play a pivotal role in the emergence of grassroots democracy within specialized cities. As a matter of fact, there is a need to undertake primary research to deepen the insight into the best practices of neighborhood-based grassroots democracy in formerly mono-industrial cities, first of all, in post-socialist countries. Potentially this research may bring together theorists and practitioners on the basis of developing an interdisciplinary, cross-national research perspective, and, in this context, critical comments, suggestions and proposals would be greatly appreciated.

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