



Training Program for Russian Policy and Opinion Makers

Policy Papers 5/11

**LOBBYING FOR WOMEN`S INTERESTS: IMPROVING THE QUALITY OF THE
DIALOGUE-BUILDING PROCESS BETWEEN WOMEN`S INTEREST GROUPS,
STATE INSTITUTIONS AND BUSINESS REPRESENTATIVES IN THE IVANOVO
REGION**

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The papers in the series have been written by young Russian policy analysts as a result of study visits to Warsaw in the framework of a fellowship programme co-coordinated by the Institute of Public Affairs (Warsaw), Warsaw and the Levada-Center (Moscow) funded by the National Endowment for Democracy. The opinions are those of the author.

1. Introduction

Support for a political regime depends to a large extent on its legitimacy and the capacity of the leading political elite to respond to current challenges and the political demands of the wider electorate. Women – with a diverse set of interests - make up an increasing part of the politically active section of Russian society. Therefore, stakeholders should accept that it is a good idea to build a constructive dialogue between women`s representatives and governmental officials. In advance of the approaching elections in Russia, new ideas and solutions, including ones for the benefit of women, are called for in society.

The main goal of this paper is to provide policymakers and women`s groups with recommendations to modify the existing situation of relation-building between women`s groups and public officials.

I propose:

- State structures which address - in the policy-making process – the interests of every segment of the female population and are keen to respond to female issues. Such state structures should become more open to dialogue with women representatives and experts on gender issues and more receptive to their propositions;
- That women`s groups should develop a more considered and constructive strategy on collaboration with state bodies and uphold interests shared and supported by a large part of the female population with more vigour in politics.

2. Problem Description:

The current Russian political system lacks representation of and lobbying by women`s interests, whereby different women`s groups can successfully promote their initiatives on improving various aspects of women`s lives in the policy-making process. The latest solutions adopted in this area - mostly to increase the birth rate in Russia – are more of a reflection of the interest of maintaining the national population than women`s self-realization. To a large extent, this is caused by an absence of productive dialogue-building practices and developed mechanisms of interaction between women`s groups and state institutions.

2.1. Current context for lobbying by women groups` interests:

A. Political factors:

The political system in Russia is currently becoming more centralized, and this tends to complicate communication between civil institutions and stakeholders.

There is no legislation concerning lobbying in Russia (the latest legislation draft was declined after the first reading in the State Duma in 2005), intensive lobbying activity is beyond legal frameworks and public interest groups cannot compete favourably with business lobbies.

The influence of Russian women`s NGOs on policy-making has been insignificant in general and has continued to fall, especially since 2004, as a result of the building of a hard chain of command and administrative reform since 2004 and the toughening of control of non-governmental organisations (amended laws “On Public Associations” and “On Non-profit Institutions” in 2006).

B. Institutional factors

There is an uneven structure of political bodies that deal with women`s issues. The only Committee on Family, Women and Children`s Issues in the State Duma (the legislative body at the federal level) transmits stakeholders` traditional family values to stakeholders. It does not support the initiatives of many women`s groups. In the Ivanovo region`s legislative and executive authorities, there are no committees that deal directly with gender issues, which means that women`s interests are tackled by a number of state institutions and thus ‘watered down’.

Legislative and executive structures in Russia have a right to consult NGOs on various subjects, but they may disregard the feedback, as the conclusions of consulted NGOs, Public Chambers, Public Hearings and Ombudsmen are only advisory in nature.

In 24 regions of Russia, a law has been passed on public legislative initiative. This allows a group of citizens to introduce a legislative proposal for compulsory consideration by a regional Parliament after collecting a certain amount of supporting signatures. This mechanism is most popular in central and more developed regions, but it is still in its infancy. In Ivanovo Region there is no such practice, but the Constitution and other supreme legislative acts of the Russian Federation declare citizens` participation in politics.

C. Cultural factors

Statistically, a larger percentage of women (compared to men) are engaged in labour relations and women have a higher turnout in elections. However, there is no popular tradition of female entrepreneurship and political leadership in society and, moreover, politicians avoid focusing on gender issues. Only Tatyana Yakovleva, First Deputy Chief of the “Edinaya Rossia” Party and a member (from the Ivanovo region) of the Committee on Health Care in the State Duma, seems at times to voice women`s interests in medicine. It is not a question of public censure but of a lack of sufficient self-confidence among women to promote their interests in politics.

D. Internal factors in women's groups

In 2004-2011, the number of active and self-directed women`s NGOs has decreased dramatically. In Ivanovo Region, women`s NGOs joined the pro-government All-Russian People`s Front and only Ivanovo Centre for Gender Studies kept out of it. Nevertheless, on a local level, women`s institutions have accumulated experience in the tackling of gender issues. However, the activities of women`s NGOs are uncoordinated, as some of them lack resources to contribute to others` projects and some represent different, sometimes polar, female preferences. This stems from the divergence of the women`s movement on an economic, social, cultural and

age-related basis, with representatives of each group promoting their own special interests. However, most women`s groups belong to the middle class and they are united by a common desire to find a channel of influence in politics. The aim of increasing women`s representation in politics seems to be common to all of them.

2.2 Symptoms of the problem:

Consultations with women`s interest groups in policy-making are often nominal or ignored.

This leads to an increase in the gap between public needs and governmental policy and results in drawing up and passing less considered and effective laws, a reduction of approval of and support for policy and a decrease in governmental legitimacy and also stimulates internal social tension.

Women`s interest groups have poor access to rapid information and the decision-making process; they have few channels of influence because of a lack of support from high political figures, particularly women. This hampers the effectiveness of the women`s movement and increases their scepticism towards the political regime.

The women`s movement in Russia lacks unanimity and networking skills, has inadequate political and legal grounding because of a lack of human resources and develops uncompetitive strategies. This affects women`s ability to lobby for gender interests and results in regular refusals to cooperate on the part of officials. Misunderstanding in society of goals and missions of women`s NGOs suppresses the women`s movement and contributes to a reduction in their activity.

These factors lead to distancing between women`s non-governmental groups and government officials, with the latter losing canvassers and, consequently, (potentially) part of the active female electorate.

3. Target audience:

- Legislative and executive Ivanovo regional authorities which deal with women`s initiatives.
- Women`s groups in Ivanovo Region
- Top business management & business-women`s groups in Ivanovo Region

4. Alternatives from Poland.

4.1. Relevance of Polish Experience

Poland is a neighbour to Russia with a socialist past and long traditions of interaction. Both political systems have been affected by the process of transformation since the collapse of the

Soviet System, which enables - to some degree – the transfer of Polish experience in dialogue building between women`s interest groups and state structures to the Russian institutional context. On the one hand, this is possible due to the similarity of public awareness and the social environment in which civil changes must take place, but, on the other hand, surely both countries also have unique socio-political grounds and directions of political development.

4.2. Current Context of Alternative Development

A. Political components

For the first decade after 1989, the dialogue between women`s interest groups and state structures in Poland developed along similar lines to that in Russia, but in the last 10 years this dialogue has achieved a new level of interaction (in Poland).

For example, the latest big success in lobbying for women`s interests concerned lobbying for gender parity on electoral lists for the Lower Chamber of Parliament, which resulted, in 2010, in Parliament introducing a law demanding that all parties must have 35% of women on electoral lists. The lobbying project was initiated and organised by a Polish female forum on the national level, under the informal leadership of feminist Professor Magdalena Środa and entrepreneur Henryka Bochniarz – “the Congress of Women”, which was able to collect more than 100 000 signatures in favour of the initial proposal. A significant part of these signatures belonged to men in their 20s. In this case, Polish female groups exercised their right to a citizen`s initiative - under which a sufficient number of citizens may submit a legislative proposal to authorities.

A similar initiative to introduce a 30% female quota on electoral lists, put forward by the State Duma Committee on Family, Women and Children Issues after appeals and public petitions by Russian women`s activists, was rejected in 2005 in the first reading of the State Duma. Nevertheless, 60% of Russians expressed their approval of the idea of a gender quota.

Thanks to the work of representatives of Polish women`s NGOs in promoting the law on gender parity, the women`s movement has been recognized as a force in the political arena, which is something that is essential in the Russian reality.

The positive changes in dialogue-building between women`s groups and politicians are defined more by external influences – above all, joining the EU in 2004, (which was accompanied by unification of Polish legislation with pan-European legislation, accepting the principles of civil society, Gender Strategy and a stimulated surge of civil activity) - rather than by internal factors, such as growth of effectiveness of women`s lobbyists and an increase in women`s involvement in politics. However, European guidelines force women`s groups to focus on issues that are conventional in the EU, such as gender mainstreaming, and may thus indirectly promote ‘bureaucratism’ in the public sector.

B. Institutional components

There are several institutional factors determining the representation of women`s interests on the political level:

- The possibility of introducing a civil law proposal - a group of citizens may submit a proposal which Parliament has to discuss, (although there is no deadline for initiating a parliamentary vote on the proposal) after collecting at least 100 000 signatures in support (0.26% of the Polish population) within three months. Members of the committee submitting the proposal are allowed to participate in further work on development of the law;
- The authorities are obliged to conduct social consultations to find out the opinions of their social partners in the process of law-development, which keeps public organisations informed about the political situation and allows for expression of public opinion;
- State bodies on the local as well as national level are obliged to draw up an annual plan of cooperation with non-governmental organizations, which implies further collaboration, although feminist groups are often excluded;
- The so-called “percentage law” which allows citizens to allocate 1% of their yearly income tax directly to an NGO which they want to support which has the status of a public benefit organization.

Theoretically, the first two mechanisms are vaguely prescribed in Russian legislation (Constitution, Committees` charters,) but often ignored in practice.

A key counter-force to lobbying for women`s interests in Poland is the Catholic Church, which has a strong influence on Polish society. It opposes women`s liberties, especially in the sphere of reproductive rights (in September 2011, a total ban on abortion was overruled by just 6 votes in the Lower Chamber of the Polish Parliament). In Russia, the influence of the Orthodox Church has not yet counteracted the development of the women`s movement, which has contributed to opportunities for women`s NGOs.

C. Cultural components

In Poland, there is a longer tradition of politically active women and female entrepreneurship. However, female activists suggest that Polish women also lack moral readiness to take part in political leadership and competition. Nevertheless, in the 1990s, Poland had a female Prime Minister, Hanna Suchocka. Currently, there are women holding high office in government. Polish women`s interest groups have established stable contacts with the Prime Minister, the Ministry of Education and effectively cooperate with Members of Parliament, although there have been clashes of opinions with the Ministry of Labour and Ministry of Equal Opportunities. During realization of larger projects, the warm support of prominent political figures such as the former Polish First Lady – Jolanta Kwaśniewska – has increased chances of success of allied women`s groups.

D. Internal components of women's groups

In Poland there is relatively more freedom of formation and functioning of non-profit organizations.

Mechanisms of professional lobbying for women`s interests are more developed in Poland, but female groups still more often resort to public protests and strikes to influence policy-making. This is determined by a lack of human, financial and administrative resources available to women`s NGOs (the situation is even worse in Russia), which reduces the number of lobbying & advocacy tools at women`s disposal.

In both countries, women`s NGOs have to raise their funds primarily from overseas foundations, but Polish NGOs also enjoy the systemic support of EU structural and cohesion funds when introducing a contribution to a third sector project within the regional policy of the EU. The Polish women`s movement is also split into different interest groups - businesswomen distance themselves somewhat from feminists - but on the issue of women`s representation in politics, they could arrive at a consensus.

Thus, Poland`s state structures are more open to dialogue with women`s experts and interest groups, which is conducive to peaceful social participation, involving the young population and maintaining their interest in current politics and political figures.

4. 3. What Polish Alternatives May We Accept into Russian Reality?

A. Lessons for Women`s NGOs:

The women`s movement has reaffirmed its presence in the political arena and started a more effective dialogue with government officials, primarily after submission of a widely supported gender parity proposal. This happened thanks to the involvement of a large number of women in public life, and the smoothing out of internal contradictions between women`s groups by organizing them into a united national forum – the Congress of Women. This organization needed a project that was universally important for women`s groups and supported by society to initiate mass activity towards a common goal. The goal required women to create a long-term strategy, develop persistency but readiness to compromise and increase their legal competence.

B. Lessons for Local Authorities:

The women`s movement has been recognized as a political force (and a party in negotiations), as it has demonstrated its solidarity and political importance. Government officials have started a new round of open communication with women`s groups, got them involved in discussion on legislative drafts in the form of social partnerships (every local authority institute has its social partners among non-governmental organizations, whose opinions it requests on new legislative acts on relevant subjects), participation in joint conferences (by invitations from NGOs), consulting women`s expert reports and responding to women`s groups` inquiries by correspondence or at personal meetings. Some politicians have included gender issues in their program to enlist women`s electoral support.

C. Lessons for Business

Women`s business associations were able to overcome traditional self-separation from feminists for the sake of a common project. It was successful in terms of promoting their interests, getting in contact with state officials and other businesswomen. The increase in women`s involvement in

politics may be common ground for (associations of) businesswomen and women's NGOs and may be a real opportunity for the latter to become a driving force in the representation of women's interests in the political arena.

4.4. Existing Conditions in Ivanovo Region for Implementation of Lessons:

A. There are many legislative and executive institutions which should, in theory, be open to civil initiatives:

- *A Deputy* has the right to introduce a proposal in the regional Duma or its committees. S/he also has to be ready to meet internal political competition for ideas and electorate, which inclines Deputies to consider prospective ideas and to be open to ties with social groups;

- *Committees and commissions* in state bodies may accept an idea or send it to the relevant institution;

- *Reception rooms of political parties* are open to fresh pragmatic ideas which have support in society, especially ahead of elections. Public chambers are governed by deputies, who are channels for promoting interest groups' initiatives.

- *Public Chambers* at regional and local levels make use of specialists and respected people from different spheres, whose opinions may be taken into account when policy-making;

B. There exist several mechanisms of communication between the public and the government

- **Special-purpose programs** are introduced by executives and may support projects for the benefit of women.

- **Public hearings** are held on strategic documents concerning Ivanovo Region development, where attending social groups may express their attitude to the policy on a decision-making stage;

- **Opinion inquiry** - legislative and executives in Russia have a right to consult the opinions/expert judgments of NGOs on draft laws or upholding of laws; such consultation has an advisory character;

- **Personal contacts** – are the most popular and effective way of promoting interests in Russia, which require the finding of common ground in problem solving.

C. In Ivanovo Region there are many NGOs focused on various women's interests: Women's initiative (Zenskaya Iniciativa), Businesswomen's Club (Klub Delovaya Zenzina), Ivanovo Centre for Gender Studies, Cradle (Kolibel), Council of Young Teachers (Sovet Molodih Pedagogov) and others. They have experience in gender issues resolving, networking and dialogue-building with politicians.

5. Conclusions

Thus, currently women's interests are underrepresented in the political sphere in Russia and Ivanovo Region. The dialogue-building process between women's groups and governmental officials is stagnant. Nevertheless, Russia is receptive to changes in the institutional context, which means there is fertile ground for successful work. Drawing a parallel with Polish experience, we see that the situation can be improved if the three social actors – government officials, women's interest groups and business representatives – acknowledge each other, recognize each other as parties for negotiations and desire to find mutual points of contact.

6. Recommendations

6.1. Recommendations for local authorities of Ivanovo Region:

- **Government representatives need to become more open to mutually beneficial dialogue and cooperation** with women's groups. Politicians should systematically address women's interests and gain sustainable electoral support from the majority of the population.
- **Ivanovo Region legislators could resume work on describing a Public legislative initiative bill** in detail. The experiences of our nearest neighbours – Yaroslavl and Kostroma Regions, Moscow are good examples. These laws have been passed and are being successfully implemented there: they are conducive to civil initiatives, and enable better monitoring of social moods and taking of requested political decisions.
- **The possibility of an opinion-inquiry procedure may be institutionalized into a sustained, mutually responsible practice.** This would help to provide policy-makers with relevant and more professional information on issues and would organically fit in with the general trend of an increase in officials' accountability to society.
- **Ivanovo Region authorities may introduce a Gender Strategy.** Within the current trend of discussion of women's participation in politics on a federal level, this would affirm the progressiveness of Ivanovo Region authorities.

6.2. Recommendations for women's groups:

- **Involve more women in the movement** in order to accumulate ideas and resources, to strengthen aspirations for change in society and to promote a review of gender issues and readiness to uphold civil rights among women. This will strengthen the position of the women's movement. A good way is by providing educational conferences and seminars on gender questions, being more open to public requirements, cooperation with media and increasing of public awareness through Internet resources.
- **Strive to overcome internal contradictions** between women's groups by establishing a large independent national women's forum. This should be dedicated to negotiations, strategies development and lobbying for gender ideas shared by a large fraction of women.

- **Try to jointly organize a large-scale project.** This should be based on ideas that are important to a large part of society besides the women organising it such as: prevention of domestic violence, reduction in the gender pay-gap, etc. The choice of such a theme will help to get public and media support and help the female organisers to become recognized as a political force and an important part of the electorate.
- **Resort to channels of civil influence to address state bodies and politicians** which deal with gender issues and to promote women`s projects and interests. Women`s groups should participate in special-purpose state programs and public hearings, put forward brief and constructive comments on government policy and establish and develop personal contacts with officials to maintain the presence of gender issues at the centre of politicians` attention.

6.3. Recommendations for business:

- **Women`s business groups should re-orientate their attitude to feminist associations** - from radical public distancing to flexible dialogue- and consensus-building. Businesswomen have common interests with other female groups, such as an increase in women`s representation in politics, etc. In collaboration with the female electorate, businesswomen may lobby decision-making bodies to their mutual benefit.
- **Heads and managing staff of businesses should become more open to dialogue and collaboration** with women`s groups. This will help to create a socially-orientated image of their companies and to promote their products in the female sector of the market.