

SOCIAL WORK IN RUSSIA: INTERNATIONAL EFFECTS ON PROFESSIONALIZATION

YARSKAYA VALENTINA¹

SARATOV STATE TECHNICAL UNIVERSITY, RUSSIA

IARSKAIA-SMIRNOVA ELENA

HIGHER SCHOOL OF ECONOMICS, RUSSIA

This paper presents the main challenges and issues affecting processes of the development of social work as a new profession in today's Russia. Since its establishment as an occupation and training program in early 1990s, the educators and students, administrators and practitioners have not only implemented several shifts in the national policy agenda but also absorbed various global influences and revised them in local policy contexts. Russia became a field where various international projects in area of social work training and practice have been implemented. The development of social work is being shaped by different power relations. A number of policy actors with different capital have been promoting their interests in shaping the legislative, socio-economic and political environment, competing for their legitimacy and status in policy processes. The professional project of social work has been conditioned by various institutions, the formal and informal 'rules of the game'. Policy and academic

1 Correspondence to Valentina Yarskaya, Department of Social Anthropology and Social Work, Saratov State Technical University, Russia. E-mail: jarskaja@mail.ru

discourses have been playing active role in public recognition of new profession and forming its knowledge base.

The first social work university curriculum in post-Soviet Russia was constructed under the influence of both international and post-Soviet legacies. Social work education in many cases has been developing in general accordance with Soviet traditions of social studies and humanities, i.e. with strong emphasis on theories and low proportion of practice teaching, weak involvement of practitioners in educational process. A first National Standard of higher professional education in social work (1995) was characterized by dominating scholastic theoretical education over the practice training, fragmentary concept of SW competences and incompatibility with the world experience of SW education. The SW curriculum according to the National standard 2000 is characterized, as previously, by fragmentariness and superfluity of subjects. New National Standards for BSW (2009) and MSW (2011) give much flexibility to universities to construct their curricula and do not ascribe titles of courses, rather, in accordance with the Bologna process, the competence-based approach is introduced.

During 1990s and early 2000s a number of international donors have made contribution to the development of higher education in Russia. The program of Open Society Institute in mid 1990th enabled several institutes of higher education including the regional ones to progress in the development of new courses on social sciences and humanities. A number of university teachers and PhD students have benefited from the study trips to USA and Europe under the support of various donors. Acquired educational materials within the frameworks of international projects are used with different effects. It depends on such factors as success of teachers and students in mastering of foreign languages, personal initiative of department or faculty administration, personal initiative, motivation and interest of educators. Educators use them more successfully in their individual scientific activity. They regularly apply to foreign literature during the elaboration of issues in dissertations, scientific articles and research projects, which influences the content of taught courses. It is reflected in increased demands for oneself as an educator in modification of

students' performance criteria. Russian SW educators began to use and elaborate new methods of students' success evaluation; field placement evaluation. In a number of cases international projects initiated the establishment of new structures (centers, subdivisions) in universities or jointly with external institutional actors.

Among the informants were both critics and optimists, their opinions were shaped by a number of factors, including personal career paths, the level of success of their institutions, and of course, positive and/or traumatic experiences of international cooperation. As for the general contribution of international cooperation into professional training of social workers, skeptics are inclined to think that the effects of projects are separate, fragmentary and non-systematic ones unlike optimists who are confident of more meaningful success. The obstacles and barriers which managers of social work educational programs had to overcome were connected with organizational, informational and human factors. There is a language barrier, which makes it difficult for Russian students to get acquainted with foreign experience of social work. They read foreign literature with difficulty or do not understand alien speech. Due to this the materials accumulated in the process of projects implementation are often uncalled by students. A geographical factor along with social and economic inequality of regions has great impact on the formation of unequal position of Russian universities in the market of international cooperation.

Academic mobility contributed not only to raising the level of specialists' skills, but also it caused brain drain. Some university teachers irrespective of their sex, age and speciality are characterized by conservatism, weak knowledge of foreign languages, lack of motivation to change without the order of the management, - all these qualities interfere with open international mutual understanding and more efficient usage of resources, offered by international projects, which are often reduced to the function of "scientific tourism".

Out of 175 universities offering SW programs only a few took part in international projects with considerable large budget that could contribute to more or less sustainable changes in the shape and content of SW curriculum, conditions and ways of teaching. As the

result of revising the SW curriculum, new courses were included in educational programs. They reflect modern perspectives of social work professionalization focusing on the aspects of independent life of people with disabilities, gender inequality, emergencies, and resources of local community, participatory approaches, and creative methods.

International projects contributed to some redistribution of resources in the field of higher education in Russia as foundations preferred alliances which included provincial universities. International projects have fostered some diffusion of power: they enabled to decrease inequality between “rich” capital and some “poor” regional universities creating favorable conditions in provincial institutions of higher education for a fast professional growth of scholars, contributing to the accumulation of relative advantages such as research and teaching potential, access to resources and initiatives of individual scholars and departments, establishing new subdivisions, enhancing programs with new courses and publishing new textbooks and syllabus. The merits of universities which took part in international projects, the achievements of departments and individual educators enable to increase their cultural and social capital and allow them to act as more equal in rights players in the field of symbolic struggle for the power of nominations including the sphere of social work. Unequal distribution of material resources and power is partially smoothed by participation in international cooperation. The individual prestige and authority of such leaders enables them today to apply the knowledge of foreign experience with confidence in teaching of social work. The administrators of Russian educational programs on social work, who received systematic education and regularly had long-term study visits abroad, possess not only professional knowledge but also authority; as a rule their career growth has a positive systematic impact on the development of an educational program and a team of colleagues on the whole.

As the result of international co-operation several textbooks, syllabus and electronic manuals were elaborated at departments and published for the new and updated courses. However, these textbooks are not the

most influential channels of particular professional SW competences and democracy values in general as they are published in a small amount of copies in provincial universities. Yet until now there are only a few international volumes on social work translated and published, including both textbooks and collections of articles. Little is published in student- and/or practitioner-friendly language, and in relation with evidence based approach, field practice and modern understanding of social inequality, human rights, comparative social policy, presenting skills and methods in social work in forms of practicum, PBL and other innovative ways of active learning approach. At the same time, many textbooks on social policy and social work written by the authors from Moscow and StPetersburg are nominated by the National Council on SWE as compulsory to be used in training. These textbooks do not receive public critical appraisal as the practice of independent review is not popular within the academic community. The principles of non-discriminatory or multicultural social work, active tolerance and social criticism are rarely present in SW textbooks.

Institutional context of international projects including access to electronic communication and Internet, special departments of international cooperation at the level of university management was formed at universities only in 1990s. The effectiveness of international exchange programs varies from rigid bureaucratic limitations and corruption to successful support of initiatives of individual scholars and departments, establishing new subdivisions, enhancing programs and publishing new textbooks and syllabus. An important structural effect of international projects in social work education in a number of regions is connected with the development of cooperation between universities, social service agencies and local authority. At the same time, certain discrepancies occurred between the two types of understanding of SW profession in academia and in practical fields. Thanks to their participation in international projects Russian educators gained more flexible and broad insight of the profession unlike their practicing colleagues who had put into the frame of non-qualified assistance very fast on the one hand, and regarded it as paper work, on the other hand. Low wages in the fields where the graduates of social work faculties and departments can work

according to their diplomas create the problem of dissonance between employment and education.

A variety and/or fuzziness of approaches to define the priorities of SW education in first half of 1990s was (in the second half of the decade replaced) by the increase of power of one capital university multiplied by its branches in the regions throughout Russia, creation of strict standard of curriculum and growing number of texts ignoring the world-wide experience and knowledge of social work. A continuing departure of foreign donors from Russia as well as an increase of centralization and anti-Western attitudes in early 2000s have led to diminishing of international support, lack of exchange opportunities and to disappointment of donors and beneficiaries with the ability of international exchange to improve quality of Russian SW education. Intensification of globalization processes, the reform of educational system following European and international standards may cause enhanced internationalization of curricula and professional practice. The impact on the enhancement of professional identity of SW educators should not be underestimated. It is overall a good contribution to the development of social sciences and humanities in Russia, which in their turn, at least part of them, contribute to the development of the critical social thinking and academic tradition in general.