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THE STAGNATION OF ANTI-CORRUPTION STUDIES ON RUSSIA: WHAT SHOULD BE DONE TO REVERSE THE SITUATION?²

The literature on anti-corruption in Russia is characterized by the prevalence of broad studies and a lack of infield research. This paper illustrates the need to expand the research focus and to investigate the processes taking place within civil society. By focusing on neglects, this work proposes new research approaches.

Keywords: anti-corruption; Russia; social sciences; civil society.

Introduction

When beginning to explore the anti-corruption literature on Russia, an inexperienced social science researcher feels intimidated by the number of available publications on the topic, proposed mostly by local scholars. The initial excitement and awe quickly leave for a feeling of disappointment. In fact, most works consist of legal studies, while social sciences seem to have been relegated to the role of ‘timid observers’, offering mainly remarks on how things should work. In this work, I argue that social sciences could and should contribute more to the development of this field of study and that, in order to do this, they should try to broaden their research approach at different levels. I also illustrate some of the aspects that deserve more attention from scholars, both local and international, focusing mainly on the neglects that concern the study of civil society.

A short introduction to the anti-corruption literature on Russia

The anti-corruption academic literature on Russia emerged in the early 2000s, when both local and foreign scholars began to produce studies on the topic, thanks to the increasing attention devoted to the post-Soviet region by international institutions. The first decade of the century was characterized by works that discussed the barriers to overcome for an effective fight against corruption [1]. After the approval of the first anti-corruption law by then president Dmitry Medvedev in 2008 [2], local scholars began to pay increasing attention to the legal

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Аннотация. Рассматривается состояние научной литературы по теме противодействия коррупции в России; исследуются аспекты, которые до сих пор остаются без должного внимания, и предлагаются новые направления исследований. Показана необходимость расширения исследовательской направленности и изучения процессов, происходящих в гражданском обществе.

Ключевые слова: противодействие коррупции; Россия; социальные науки; гражданское общество; общественные организации.

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aspects of anti-corruption [3, 4] and to the role of civil society [5, 6]. The difference between the academic production proposed by local scholars and scholars affiliated to international institutions emerged more clearly in the 2010s. In fact, during these years, local social science researchers failed in contributing significantly to the expansion of knowledge in this field, continuing to focus on the theoretical role played by civil society, remarking on the importance to establish a dialogue with the state, and to reinforce the collaboration between these two spheres, without offering substantial infield investigations [7, 8]. As a consequence, with the exception of the works proposed by Schmit-Pfister and Zaloznaya et al. [9, 10], the role of civil society has remained mainly unexplored.

What should be done to reverse the situation? Broadening the field

According to the discourse proposed by international institutions, the reduction of corruption is *sine qua non* for the development of democracy that, on the other hand, represents a prerequisite for the effective implementation of anti-corruption reforms. International institutions provide a moral justification for the urgency to promote democratic and anti-corruption principles through standardized policies and programs based on western models that emphasize the central role of civil society [11]. This universalistic approach has been criticized by scholars who remark on the importance to consider and investigate the local context, and to overcome an idealized understanding of civil society [12]. However, normative studies remain predominant for what concerns anti-corruption in Russia. The nexus between democracy and anti-corruption, present in the international discourse [13], is here overlooked in studies that focus only on anti-corruption. I argue that this approach limits the understanding of what anti-corruption is in Russia, as it neglects the hypothesis that this field can be influenced by how democracy is perceived and by the different meanings that can be associated with this idea.

According to Levada polls published in 2015 [14], the majority of Russians (62%) thinks that the country needs democracy, 55% of the respondents declare that it requires a model of democracy that reflects the ‘national traditions and specificity’ of Russia. These results demonstrate how only 13% would opt for a western model of democracy, a percentage of people even lower than those who would prefer to re-establish a Soviet democracy (16%). These data reflect the historical development of the country and the political discourse created by the government during the last two decades. According to Drozdova and Robinson [15], who analyzed Putin’s speeches over the years, the president has always expressed a positive attitude towards democracy, although emphasizing more the importance of other aspects such as patriotism, the creation of a strong state, and the collaboration between government and civil society, in order to maintain stability and to support the development of the country. In his words, democracy is important but it does not have to correspond to the western model, suggesting that the country should follow a path that better conforms to its specificities. It is interesting how the same approach can be noticed also in the official discourse on anti-corruption, which suggests that the country should develop its own instruments to counteract the problem, avoiding external impositions [16]. International institutions propose a depoliticized and universal approach to anti-corruption [17], but how is it understood and re-elaborated in a context such as the Russian one, where the idea of democracy seems to differ from the one expressed

by western models? The literature produced so far has not explored the meanings that anti-corruption and democracy have acquired in the specific context of Russia. It has also addressed the question of anti-corruption separately from the question of democracy. How can we understand how anti-corruption in Russia has transformed if we do not know what this idea means for those who are directly engaged in the process? How has the idea of democracy affected the way anti-corruption is viewed?

Exploring the field

Despite the great importance placed on the role played by civil society in local studies, as mentioned above, very few works have tried to reveal what this role actually consists of. As explained previously, local publications remark on the importance of the collaboration between government and civil society, often urging the state to reinforce dialogue with the latter, but the studies provide only a superficial analysis of the sector. The situation does not improve significantly if we consider the limited number of works that proposed infield investigations, mainly published by scholars affiliated to foreign universities. Zaloznaya et al. [10] focused on relations with the government, describing them as a collaboration established with the only purpose of reinforcing the positive image of the state, but actually limiting the impact of civil society. As a consequence, the nature of this sector remains unexplored. Chandoke argues that civil society has now become a 'consensual concept' [18. P. 1], based on a normative and idealized academic approach, urging scholars to explore what this concept actually means. The relations between state and civil society in Russia have been extensively analyzed by international scholars over the last decade; they investigated the consequences of the approval of the laws on 'foreign agents' (2012) [19] and on 'undesired organizations' (2015) [20]. The role of organizations and initiatives engaged in anti-corruption, however, has not been investigated at the micro level, neglecting the work carried out every day by workers, and at the meso level, overlooking how the politicization of the sector might have affected the different actors. Until the early 2010s, in Russia there were only a handful of organizations and research centers engaged directly in anti-corruption [21]. For most organizations anti-corruption represented only a side-task, and it was only between the late 2000s and the early 2010s that the structure of the sector significantly transformed, when the fight against corruption became one of the main objectives of president Dmitry Medvedev, but also one of the main instruments in the hands of the political opposition. During the last decade anti-corruption civil society initiatives and organizations supported by the opposition were created; nevertheless, this particular aspect has not been investigated by scholars. The politicization of civil society deserves a more in-depth analysis, as it clashes with the model promoted by international institutions, raises questions concerning the nature of civil society and the effects of blurring boundaries between the political and civil sphere. Dismissing the politicization of the field by the opposition, scholars risk providing a distorted and limited understanding of the situation in the country. How do we conciliate the agency given to civil society by the international depoliticized anti-corruption discourse with the political goals of some organizations in Russia? Why does the impact of the state agenda deserve particular attention, but the possible instrumentalization of civil society by the opposition for political purposes can be

overlooked? The discourses on anti-corruption created by both the government and the opposition have been analyzed by Popova, who argues that both approaches risk to lead to a 'systematic reproduction of corruption practices' [22. P. 206]. We know little, however, about the impact that these discourses have had on civil society organizations and initiatives. Furthermore, as mentioned above, scholars have extensively investigated the impact of the NGO laws focusing on the strategies developed by workers to avoid any collision with authorities, and Tysiachniouk et al. [23] explained how local environmental organizations use informal practices to simulate compliance with the laws, such as concealing foreign funding sources, making informal agreements with officials, or changing the juridical status of the organizations to escape restrictions. The literature on anti-corruption has not yet investigated how organizations have adjusted to the new laws, and it remains unexplored how they move between the possible necessity to use informal practices to carry out their work and the principles they represent. The risk for civil society to become 'anti-democratic and self-serving' [24. P. 217] deserves more attention in a complex context such as the Russian one. The studies proposed so far have not focused on the practices and strategies used in everyday work, and only in-depth infield research could disclose the reality behind projects and official statements.

Another aspect that deserves more attention is the actual role played by institutionalized non-governmental organizations in today's Russia. The studies produced after the fall of the Soviet Union highlighted the lack of trust among citizens toward civil society organizations, and during recent years scholars have observed the increasing importance of informal associations of citizens that seem to develop in parallel to existing organizations [25]. How do more institutionalized organizations adjust to the transformations occurring within society? Do they have an impact on the process of democratization, whatever this means in the specific local context, or do they struggle to be identified by citizens as their representatives and as legitimized anti-corruption warriors?

Repositioning the field

The necessity to broaden the focuses and to explore anti-corruption from different perspectives also involves repositioning the field as a whole. The studies produced so far are affected, on the one hand, by the tendency of international scholars to consider the post-Soviet regions as a separate space that can be compared only to countries that share a similar historical, political and social background and, on the other hand, by the research approaches used by local scholars that exclude them from the international debate. The predominance of legal studies or broad analyses, often atheoretical, impedes the production of works that can contribute significantly to the understanding of what anti-corruption in Russia is and that can attract the interest of the international academic community. It is true that the field of anti-corruption emerged globally only in the 1990s, and that until 2008 Russia did not have an anti-corruption law. Furthermore, the academic system of the country had to adjust to the economic and political changes occurring at the national level and, simultaneously, to the transformations affecting the sector at the global one. It is time for scholars to try to overcome the label of post-Soviet studies, and to propose experiences and types of knowledge rooted in the specific local context, as emphasized by Müller [26]. The international debate

on anti-corruption urges scholars to explore new paths and to go beyond predetermined schemas. In order to overcome a normative approach, developed on the basis of a western understanding of anti-corruption and democracy, scholars should try to link the experience of Russia with the experience of other countries outside the post-Soviet region, with the goal of ‘unsettling and reconstituting standard processes of knowledge production’, as suggested by Bhambra [27. P. 115] when discussing the potential of post-colonial and de-colonial thinking.

Conclusion

This paper explores some of the aspects and questions that have so far been neglected by scholars studying anti-corruption in Russia. It also stresses the important role that the contribution of local scholars could play in expanding and developing this field of studies. I argue that the evolution of the sector deserves more attention from social scientists, who should undertake more infield investigations. The current situation of stagnation, especially at the local level, can be overturned by broadening the focuses of the investigation, by venturing into the field to explore everyday practices and reveal meanings, and by looking beyond the boundaries of the post-Soviet region to take inspiration from post-colonial experiences. The significant development of the anti-corruption sector in Russia in the last decade, its partial politicization, the need to link the question of anti-corruption with the one of democracy, its potential role in the transformations that civil society is undergoing are aspects that have remained almost unexplored, but that deserve more attention and courage from scholars, both local and international.

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This article discusses the state of the academic literature on anti-corruption in Russia, exploring which aspects have been neglected so far, and proposing new research focuses. In the works produced

by both local and international scholars, the question of anti-corruption is delinked from the question of democracy. However, the specificities of the Russian context suggest that a possible connection between these two ideas deserves more attention. The government has created a discourse that emphasizes the need for Russia to develop its own democracy, warning against the mere imposition of western models. This idea is also supported by public opinion. The official discourse also highlights the necessity to develop local instruments to counteract corruption, avoiding external interferences. However, the way these ideas could have been perceived and translated by civil society actors has not yet been investigated. Studies have paid little attention to the practices that constitute the everyday work carried out by anti-corruption organizations. This article suggests that scholars should research the possible inconsistencies generated by the use of informal practices at the micro level, and investigate whether these clash with the principles of democracy and anti-corruption promoted by such organizations. The role of more-institutionalized organizations is another aspect that deserves more attention. During recent years, scholars have discussed the increasing importance of informal associations. However, the impact of this new trend on organizations engaged in anti-corruption has not been analyzed. Researchers should try to detect how these are engaged in the transformation taking place within society, and whether they struggle to position in this context. The article also remarks on the importance to overcome the boundaries set by the post-Soviet label, both spatially and epistemologically. Local meanings and experiences should be investigated, trying to overcome the western models at the base of the international discourse. In this process, a crucial role is played by local social science scholars, whose inside knowledge can contribute significantly to studying and thereby revising the current state of stagnation.

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