

Social Change as a Biographical Prospect: The unchanging reality of Russians

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Introduction

In the concept of the German term *Bildung*, it is advantageous for educational science to not only perceive education as a mere transmission of knowledge but also to encompass personal development, moral growth, and cognitive abilities within its definition. This broader perspective enriches the scope of research in the field and lends support to discussions within the psychological domain. Conversely, a poststructuralist viewpoint emphasizes the significant influence of the social sphere on individuals. In educational science, the biographical approach appears capable of illustrating the interconnectedness of both domains, however focusing primarily on the subjectivity of individual life stories. Consequently, employing hermeneutical analytical tools for interpreting biographies and their narrative styles ensures the objectivity of judgement.

This paper will be kept in the borders of the foretold logics, however still alludes to the experiences of the author. More specifically, the theoretical findings will be illustrated through the case of Russia, focusing on the political, social, and individual spheres. These findings will take the form of autoethnographic field notes, as the choice of topic itself emerged from personal observations made within the country. The central question this paper seeks to address is: How does civil society influence individual biographical prospects?

To answer this, the first part of the paper will examine the concept of civil society on political and individual levels. This will be followed by an analysis of the interrelation between social change and biographical prospects. The paper will conclude with a discussion on the role of the concept of the future in biographical research.

Empfohlene Zitierweise: Nashchekina, Anastasiia (2025). Social Change as a Biographical Prospect : Civil Society as a Biographical Prospect: The unchanging reality of Russian. UR: Das Journal, 3(1), S. 63-71. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.48646/ur.20250307>

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Civil society between political and social spheres

To start with a definition, in political science civil society is being understood as an “organized social realm that operates on a voluntary basis, generates and sustains itself independently, operates autonomously from the state, and adheres to a legal framework or a set of shared rules” (Diamond 1994, p.5). However, to gain an in-depth understanding of the paper’s topic, the term needs to be examined from both political and sociological perspectives. While politics focus their attention on the structural aspect, some social theorists have conducted research regarding the components of civil society. Theories that take a poststructuralist turn are particularly useful for biographical studies, as they undermine the fixed meaning of social facts, thereby serving as a bridge between society and the individual. In this context, Jeffrey Alexander’s civil sphere theory connects the existence of social institutions to solidarity. He writes: “It was a way of trying to bring what philosophers call a normative dimension onto a sociological concept in order to highlight horizontal as compared to vertical relationships” (2020, p.192-193). So, following this thought, civil society or a civil sphere, functioning on an interindividual level, creates the scope of meanings for an individual to absorb and, consequently, a set of rules to follow.

The Civil Society, especially from a political point of view, is often seen as being intertwined with a democratic system. Through its voluntarily basis, the civil society sets an individual activeness as a condition for its functioning. This makes the case of Russia particularly interesting, as the country is currently identified as authoritarian. The opinion seems to be broadly accepted among the Russian population, that with Vladimir Putin becoming a President in 2000, the ruling elites began the process of keeping the power, rather than establishing a working democracy. As the evidence for that stands the usage of new media tools by the ruling elites to control the happenings in the social sphere nowadays. Further evidence emerges during conversations with individuals encountered in daily life during my trip to Russia.

February 2024, Kalingrad, Russia

We were taking a taxi to the city center, and our driver, a very talkative middle-aged man who was born and raised in Kaliningrad, enthusiastically engaged us in conversation. When we mentioned that we were tourists and wanted to explore the city, he began telling us stories about the buildings we passed, voluntarily offering us an informal tour of Kaliningrad. The following dialogue took place:

- “Have you seen the House of Soviets yet? If not, hurry up, they’re demolishing it. They say that in a couple of months, there won’t be a stone left.
- But why are they demolishing it? Isn’t it an architectural monument?
- I don’t know, apparently, they want to build a shopping center in its place. It’s the city center, after all. You know, money. What can we do.”

The phrases “Well, what is there to be done?” and “It is what it is” were oddly common expressions that I often heard in various contexts. I have overheard people saying them in coffee shops, while waiting in line at supermarkets, and even while sitting on benches in the forest, enjoying the scenery.

These expressions convey a sense of powerlessness in the face of unfolding events. It seems that the course of life is determined for individuals rather than by them. They appear to be passive observers of changes imposed from above. Furthermore, Russians often describe themselves as apolitical during discussions about the political sphere, thereby absolving themselves of responsibility for engaging in the management of political reality. Consequently, civil society, as a voluntarily sustained organization, appears to be in a challenging position in maintaining itself within the borders of Russia nowadays - at least at the scale necessary to drive significant social change.

Some researches and surveys point to a weak state of civil society in Russian post-soviet period. Historically, it emerged only in 1980-1990s, so in the 21st century it has been in the process of development (Stuvøy 2020, p.103). However, in the governmental structures starting to control the social domain, the civil society, counting not that many engaged citizens at the time, started losing its power. As Stuvøy writes: “Essentially, the state was not particularly interested in controlling the emerging civil society. Today, the situation is different. Political developments in Russia are increasingly dominated by anti-liberal and repressive legislation on NGOs” (2020, p.106). Interestingly enough, the governmental initiatives paid special attention to social deviation starting in 2010, which is reflected strongly in laws of 2020-2024 years. An example for that is a federal law 135-F3, which included the notes about the influence of an “untraditional sexual orientation” on children. With that, even the mentioning of LGBT in advertisements could lead to a fee or, in the law being vaguely interpreted, to an administrative arrest. Ten years later, in 2023, Supreme Court banned “LGBT Movement”, labeling it as extremist. In doing so, the law not only pursued taking control over the social sphere, but also intervened in the personal matters by evaluating individual’s sexual orientations. Overall, conformity among the population has been, and continues to be, expected by governmental structures. However, in authoritarian regimes, it is common for the state to either suppress or instrumentalize civil society.

The dialectical relationship between the individual and society underscores the mutual influence that each exerts on the other. Societal structures establish the framework within which individuals operate, while individuals, as active agents, contribute to shaping society and driving social change. Poststructuralist philosophers, such as Foucault, focus on how power dynamics, language, and societal structures shape the individual, emphasizing the external forces that influence identity.

From the perspective of biographical research, it is equally important to consider the interactional dimension of the civil sphere. Georg Simmel, an upholder of formal sociology, stresses the significance of interpersonal interactions in the process of social formation. He introduces the concepts of *Wechselwirkung* (interaction) and *Vergesellschaftung* (socialization), arguing that individuals contribute to the construction of social reality through communication. He writes:

„Als den Ausgangspunkt aller sozialen Gestaltung können wir uns nur die Wechselwirkung von Person zu Person vorstellen. [...] Die weitere Entwicklung ersetzt nun diese Unmittelbarkeit der wechselwirkenden Kräfte durch die Schaffung höherer überpersönlicher Gebilde, die als gesonderte Träger eben jener Kräfte auftreten und die Beziehungen der Individuen untereinander durch sich hindurchleiten und vermitteln.“ (Simmel 1900, p.143-144).

In this way, through the process of communication individuals construct a shared reality, shaping the societal norms and feasible opportunities. If a civil society is characterized as weak or ineffective, individuals may internalize this perception, which weakens beliefs in meaningful change.

On this point, it is necessary to take a look into the affects this personal perception of social realm has on constitution of society.

The relation between social change and a recognition of the biographical prospects – reality in Russia

As explained previously, the interaction between the individual and the society stands on the premises of formation of society itself. Now, putting a person in the center of discussion, it is insightful to turn to biographical research that made some steps in unmasking this interaction from the point of view of an individual. What first comes to light, biography as a term cannot be understood fully without taking into account the social domain:

„Auch andere Theoriekonzepte der Biographieforschung (z. B. Fischer/Kohli 1987) betonen den dialektischen Charakter des Biographiebegriffs. Er bezeichnet nicht das einzelne Individuum oder seine innere psychische Verfassung, sondern die sich immer wieder fort- und umschreibende Geschichte eines gesellschaftlichen Individuums in Relation zu den sozialen Kontexten ihrer Formation. In Biographien sind deshalb Besonderes und Allgemeines, Individualität und Gesellschaftlichkeit strukturell miteinander verbunden“ (Dausien 2011, p.114).

Focusing on the effect of a social structure on the individual: If a certain social structure implies the certain rules for an individual to believe in and to follow, it is comprehensible, that, when the civil society is well-developed and active, the individual himself is prone to recognize the ability of change. Bettina Dausien uses the term Biographizität when referring to the ability to see oneself as an active actor of one's biography. The term is explained by her as not a technique, but a potential of societal reflection of the individual experience and the individual biographical construction of societal experience (Dausien 2011, p.115).

As noted earlier, in my observations of Russians discussing the state of society and their own biographies, the disbelief in change often underpinned the conversations. Even with the war between Russia and Ukraine starting in February 2022, which brought about some big changes in the international relations of Russia as a country, the routine of the people living there has not changed drastically.

February 2024, Kaliningrad, Russia

I went to the supermarket, awaiting to see empty shelves or any other kind of changes, that were brought about by restrictions on import of products. I have heard my friends grieving about Coca-Cola. A feeling of disappointment struck me, when I saw not one, but ten different sodas with the name "Cola", taking up the whole shelf. It was "Cola" by Russian brands such as Dobrij, Aqualife, Ochakovo and many more. I bought a couple of them to try. When I got home, I was still drinking Coca-Cola, it just tasted a little different and had a different design.

This sentiment extends beyond material conditions to the interpersonal dynamics. As most individuals who openly voiced opposition to government actions either left the country or were labeled "foreign agents" and compelled to go abroad, discussions about political events are often suppressed. That creates an illusion that nothing significant has happened - or is happening.

The theories on the biographical work state that an individual constantly obeys the changes, consciously or not. Rosenthal writes:

"Das Subjekt macht immer neue Erfahrungen, kommt in neue Lebensverhältnisse [...] Die Entwicklung stagniert nicht, das Subjekt ist immer einem Wandel – einem bewusst erlebten oder latent vollzogenen Wandel – unterlegen. Jede neue Erfahrung muss in das bisher Bestehende eingefügt werden" (1987, p.27).

Therefore, when an individual views social reality as stagnant and resistant to change, their experiences within this framework accumulate, fostering the perception that life is inherently unchangeable. As a result, interpreting new experiences that deviate from established patterns becomes increasingly difficult.

The biographical ability to perceive one's life as shapable and to perceive oneself as an active actor in one's life is being limited to the scope of possibilities, presented in the social reality. Furthermore, examining the social sphere and its profound influence on an individual's perception through the lens of solidarity reveals that if the majority of people surrounding an individual share a particular understanding of reality, the individual is likely to adopt a similar perspective. In Russia, governmental actions have significantly contributed to shaping this collective vision of reality. By using new media as a tool for maintaining subordination and propaganda as a tool for controlling the information flow, the average citizen has been exposed to a narrative that aligns with the interests of authoritarian governance.

Considering Biographizität as the capacity of individuals to reflect on past and present experiences, it is essential to acknowledge the value of this acquired knowledge in shaping the future at both individual and societal levels. In the following section, I will examine the concept of the future within the context of biographical research.

The role of future in biographical research

Biographical research places significant emphasis on the dimension of time, considering the past, present, and future as interconnected aspects of an individual's life, shaped by events and their personal interpretation. He states, that while experiences emerge from certain events, their meaning is first shaped through reflection of these events and their correlation to the prior events, that took place in one's life. With that, experiences remain tied to the occasions, that triggered them, however build a continuous timeline and have a double time horizon: they connect the past and future perspectives (Schulze, 2006, p. 98-101). He clarifies: "Sie formieren sich in der Erinnerung, im Rückblick auf Erlebnisse in der Vergangenheit. Aber ihre Intention ist nicht rückwärts gewandt, sondern auf die Zukunft gerichtet" (Schulze 2006, p.101). Simply put, memories of past events shape an individual's expectations for future events.

Other theories that focus explicitly on the time dimension in biographical research emphasize the interplay between the future and the present. A thorough explanation is presented by Kruse, who distinguishes between "unmittelbare Zukunft", "nahe Zukunft" and "ferne Zukunft". The first typification of future is being understood as a continuation of the present and serves as a goal and explanation for the present actions of the subject. The "nahe Zukunft" refers to the category of the future, where definite plans, expectation and emotions, linked to them, fall into. In turn, "ferne Zukunft" refers to imprecise plans that an individual places somewhere on the timeline, but which require additional time to become precise. In that sense, "ferne Zukunft" captures an individual's hopes and anticipations for their overall life trajectory. As Kruse writes:

"Darüber hinaus wird die ferne Zukunft in der Einstellung des Menschen zu seiner Zukunft angesprochen: Die Überzeugung, die Situation nicht verändern und die Zukunft nicht gestalten zu können oder eben „keine Zukunft mehr zu haben“, berührt nicht nur die nahe, sondern auch die ferne Zukunft" (Kruse 2000, p.94).

It is crucial to mention, that the aforementioned categories of the future are being individually perceived, which means that the accurate differentiation requires a view from a personal perspective.

By synthesizing the theoretical perspectives of Kruse and Schulze, it can be posited that past experiences, by undergoing the inner processes of adding personal meaning and reflection, transform into the aspiration of an individual, with the view of its own future based on the already experienced events. Thus, the past serves as the foundation for constructing one's future. In turn, the present functions as a mediator between the past and the future, shaped by both preceding experiences and anticipated events.

In the examination of the dimension of the future, Kraus states, that it has no perceptual content, but is full of cognitive content and includes an individual's hopes, expectations, goals, and thoughts (2003, p.36). Further in his reasoning, he connects the Identity Theories to the concept of future and comes to the idea, that the future plays a vital role for identity development through a psychological function of "futuring" – the envisioning of oneself in the future (Kraus 2003, p.36). Taking this into account, it can be stated, that future prospects

influence an individual's present beliefs and actions.

Applying the theoretical frameworks to my observations made in Russia, it can be concluded, that, in general, the population tends to view the future as predictable and unsurprising.

February 2024, Kaliningrad, Russia

One evening, I was talking to my friend on the phone and mentioned seeing a banner on the street promoting the upcoming presidential elections, urging people to vote for Putin. He laughed and said he didn't need any advertising. We then began discussing the elections, and he told me, "If anyone asks how I know who will become president... I just know".

That example serves as a case, where the permanence of outcomes of past events made a person be assured of the outcome of a future event. Memory of the past affected the expectations for the future. Moreover, given the current state of Russian civil society, where little to no change is expected in the political and social landscape, individuals are immersed in a reality that structurally anticipates no significant shifts ahead.

Focusing on the future as a central aspect of analyzing the present, it is reasonable to suggest that if an individual perceives the future as unchangeable, the likelihood of developing apathy increases. Linking the previously discussed social dimension to the temporal concept of the future, Kraus's argument appears particularly relevant. In "Das Regime des engen Blickes" he writes:

"Implizite Voraussetzung für meine Überlegung ist die These, dass das Nachdenken über subjektive Konstruktionen von Zukunft nicht losgelöst von den Veränderungen in der gesellschaftlichen Konstruktion von Zukunft stattfinden kann. Denn Zeitkonstruktionen sind keine privatistischen Übungen, sondern gesellschaftlich vermittelte Konstruktionen (Gurvitch 1969). Sie werden mit dem in ihr verfügbaren begrifflichen und narrativen Formmaterial geschaffen und gedacht" (Kraus 2003, p.35).

In Russia, civil society was underdeveloped when the authoritarian regime began encroaching on the social sphere. Now, the social sphere seems to promote passive behavioral norms among individuals. As a result, on a greater scale, the prospects for the future seem to be shaped by authoritarian government initiatives, which benefit from the population's apathy in maintaining power.

Conclusion

In this paper I have tried to draw the connection between the state of a civil society and an individual position towards future. The civil society in its definition relates to the actions in political sphere, however by being understood organizationally separated from a governmental apparatus, is rooted in the social domain. Civil society's effectiveness is contingent upon its ability to generate solidarity among its members. However, in authoritarian regimes like Russia, governmental control over social spheres often suppresses civil society's development and fosters a sense of powerlessness among citizens. So, by introducing the concepts of social sphere, solidarity and interaction, the individual becomes relevant for the discussion.

Biographical research sheds light on how individuals perceive and navigate societal structures, it emphasizes the importance of recognizing the interplay between personal experiences and social contexts. Based on my observations, I came to the hypothesis, that because of the Russian civil society being rather inactive currently due to the developments in the political sphere, the individuals are inclined to perceive themselves as observers of changes, not active actors. The concept of Biographizität serves as a good theoretical base for that assumption. It underscores individuals' capacity to shape their own narratives within societal constraints, yet this capacity is limited when the prevailing social reality appears stagnant or unchangeable. So, moving to the biographies and the individual dimension, the space for discussion of time and its role in the personal perception of one's life emerges. By talking about the time dimension in general, the interplay between past, present and future events come to light. However, I see the category of future as more relevant for the further explanation, as it is the future, that plays a crucial role in shaping present attitudes and behaviors and opens up the possibility of change. In Russia, where civil society struggles against governmental suppression, individuals may perceive the future as predetermined, what leads to a sense of apathy. This dynamic emphasizes the relationship between societal and individual constructions of the future, highlighting the need to understand how societal structures influence personal perceptions. Ultimately, by examining the intersections of civil society, individual biography, and perceptions of the future, we gain insights into the complex dynamics shaping social change and personal agency within authoritarian contexts like Russia. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for making progress in transforming societies and giving people the tools to challenge oppressive systems.

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