

## **“Disabled People Who Want to Work” Some Problems of Employing and Employment for People with Visual Impairments in Contemporary Russia**

In my presentation I suppose to consider problems of employment of the blind people and people with low vision in contemporary Russia.

In the late Soviet period (1960-1980s) the Soviet state found and financially supported special enterprises where the blind people could work. The labor was simple and monotonous but people could earn money, use some social and other services for free, and support their identity as “useful members of the society.” However, this paternalistic system of social protection prevented their integration into society, hindered their free choice in making the professional careers, and promoted a kind of “disabled social and cultural ghetto,” in which disabled people studied, worked, got married, etc. Disabled people were also perceived by so called “normal” people as “weak,” “useless,” and burden for the society.

After the collapse of the USSR, most special enterprises lost the financial and administrative support, many of them were closed, and the unemployment among disabled people (including people with visual impairments) is very high. Drawing on my field research (results of participant observation, in-depth interviews, and a survey which I conducted in 2015-2021) I consider the situation with employing and employment for the blind and people with low vision in Russia. There are several trends in attempts made by the governmental and local authorities for improve the situation with employing people with visual impairments: support of some special enterprises for disabled people which survived from the

Soviet period; creation of new centers or departments where people with visual impairments can work (e.g., call centers), creation of so called quotas for disabled people (the entrepreneurs must accept a disabled person or pay a fine). All these forms of social protections root in the paternalistic approach to disability when disabled people do not participate in making decisions. Taking into account opinions of the blind people in Russia, including activists of some movements for their rights, I conclude with some possible options for employment for the people with visual impairments including using digital technologies for getting new professions and new possibilities for getting jobs; support for social businesses where disabled people could work with “normal” people, creating information centers where people with visual impairments can get information about new professions and job. These and some other steps could promote the better social inclusion and – at the same time – the autonomy and dignity of blind people, to help their better integration into the society. However, the war against Ukraine and anti-Russian sanctions deprived disabled people from many possibilities including access to new technologies, etc.

- \* Iarskaia-Smirnova E. 2001. “Social change and self-empowerment: stories of disabled people in Russia.” In: Priestley, M. (ed) *Disability and the Life Course: global perspectives*. Cambridge : Cambridge University Press. P.101-112.

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