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Activating Faith: Compassionate Care and Social Justice in Russia

What is the generative capacity of compassion in a place like Russia, which has become a country of stark income inequalities, political restrictions, and, most notably, limitations on religious activity? More intriguingly, how do the efforts of religiously affiliated social services programs to provide care for those who are disenfranchised from official categories and structures of need and deservingness — the poor, the homeless, asylum seekers, and other victims of human rights violations—produce new modes of social justice and civic engagement? Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork conducted among a Moscow-based network of religious charitable organizations and their secular partners, this paper examines how assistance providers, government officials, recipients, and supporters promote a form of practical compassion in which goodness and kindness are not merely moral ideals but are forms of social action. Despite the hardships, injustices, and despair these faith-based assistance providers encounter on a regular basis, there is a pervasive sense of optimism that kindness will ultimately prevail over poverty, injury, and injustice. In Russia, faith-based compassionate care enervates an economy of affect that produces not only economic value that encourages further acts of kindness, but also political capital that is invested in civic life. As such, assistance providers are transformed into social justice activists.

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