

# Civic Engagement in Local Multicultural Communities of Southern Russia

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**Abstract**--The article presents aspects of civil activity in the South of Russia in the context of formation of civil institutions in multicultural regional societies. The researchers note that the complex ethno-cultural structure of Southern Russia regional population has a significant impact on civil activity. The empirical basis of scientific study of civil activity is a set of empirical information sources, including the results of sociological research based on the methods of population questionnaire survey, focus groups and expert interviews. The authors conclude that civil activity in the South of Russia is initiated mainly from upstairs by state authorities or various public organizations. In local multicultural communities, there is also an increase in civil activity due to participation of people in civil protest actions organized from upstairs by representatives of opposition forces. On the other hand, there is also an increase in practice of civic activism in the framework of grass-roots civic initiatives aimed at organizing charitable actions to help people in difficult situations, and environmental actions related to environmental protection and formation of environmental culture. This research can be used for the universities, teachers and students. In this study the authors expanded their understanding of civic engagement in local communities in the South of Russia. The study reveals the reasons for civil passivity in local communities, which, according to the authors, lie in specifics of Russian mentality structure where ideas, values and attitudes of statist-paternalistic nature play a large role.

**Keywords**--culture, multicultural region, local communities, multi-ethnic regional society, ethno-culture, citizenship, civic activity, civic and patriotic practices, volunteering.

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Civic activity of various social groups is of particular importance in local communities in the period of social transformations. This activity is due to the peculiarities of civil society formation and the level of citizenship development, which. As noted in one of the Council of Europe documents, the level of citizenship development, on the one hand, implies that all the citizens, women and men, should fully enjoy human rights and feel protected by a democratic society. On the other hand, citizenship also implies that everyone should be involved in issues related to social life and act as an active and responsible citizen who respects the rights of

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others. However, in Russia there are problems with such a feature of citizenship as active participation of individuals in social affairs (Baibarin, Mashkin&Shelengovskiy, 2016; Faleeva et al., 2017; Minakhmetova et al., 2017; Podymov et al., 2019). According to the results of sociological studies, 13% of Russians are "ready to participate in solving common affairs", and only 3% are willing "to take responsibility for what is going on in the country" (Gorshkov, 2016: 256).

At the same time, researchers note that in the present Russian society, against the backdrop of low civic activity level, there takes place a local level revival (Gorshkov, 2016: 247). In this regard, sociological study of civic activity in local communities of various regions (in the South of Russia in particular), acquires special scientific and practical significance (Volkov, 2018; Mukhametzyanova et al., 2018; Cherdymova et al., 2018; Makarova et al., 2019; Gorbunov et al., 2019).

## **II. LITERATURE REVIEW**

Civil activity in modern society is the subject of various disciplinary research practices (Shevchenko et al., 2018). In foreign scientific literature, special attention is paid to the issues related to the civic activity decline of developed countries, especially among the young people (Adler & Goggin, 2005; Stolle & Hooghe, 2005; Putnam, 2005; Van Zomeren et al., 2004). The Russian scientists studying civil activity in the context of civil society formation (Yagodka, 2015; Kislitsyn&Sirazhudinova, 2018; Cornilov et al., 2019), note the low potential of citizenship and low civic activity level of Russians (Sitnikova, 2014: 12; Gorshkov&Petukhov, 2017: 203). Therefore, researchers, considering the civil activity as a sign of Russian society democratization, pay special attention to formation of Russian civil culture (Shestopal, 2011). Some aspects of civil activity in the South of Russia are also considered in the context of formation of civil institutions in multi-ethnic regional societies. At the same time, researchers note that the complex ethno-cultural structure of southern Russian regions has a significant impact on civil activity (Erokhin & Vorobyov, 2009; Sirazhudinova, 2012). However, in general, civil activity of local communities in the South of Russia has not yet been a subject of special sociological research.

## **III. METHODS AND MATERIALS**

The basis of scientific study of local communities' civil activity in the South of Russia was a set of sources of empirical information, including the results of sociological research conducted by means of population questionnaire survey, focus groups and expert interviews. Interpretation of empirical results of sociological research was carried out within the framework of a multidimensional methodological construct, in which civil activity was treated as a repertoire of various civil practices aimed at solving socially significant problems of local communities.

## **IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

Sociological analysis and interpretation of empirical information allow us to draw a conclusion about the lack of civil subjectivity of the population in local communities in the South of Russia. This is primarily due to the fact that in the minds of Russians the ideas of citizenship (as evidenced by results of the questionnaire), are

mostly statist-paternalistic in nature. Therefore, the civil attitudes aimed at solving socially significant problems in local communities are not yet fully in demand.

However, in local communities of Southern Russia, there is an increase in civil activity of population, especially among the young people. This is due to the fact that, according to the questionnaire results, civic consciousness of young people is dominated by statist ideas about the state as the main source of civic activity. Therefore, in the minds of young people, there is a clear link between ideas about the state and citizenship. Thus, focus groups participants generally hold the opinion expressed by one of them as follows: "I think it is stupid to consider yourself a citizen of the world. The world is made up of different states, and we are all citizens of some state."

On the other hand, civic consciousness of Russian youth was formed in conditions of modernizing transformations of post-Soviet society. Russian youth is characterized by civic values and aspirations to display civic activity, including the level of local communities, more than other age groups. As one of the focus group participants noted, "in order to make this world a better place, we must first make the world around us better, the world in which we live."

The lack of civil subjectivity of Russians causes the following feature of their civil activity: it is initiated mainly from upstairs – from the state and municipal authorities or various public organizations. Such an activity is manifested primarily in some civil actions aimed at demonstrating civil unity and civic solidarity of Russian society. The civil actions organized by public authorities include events related to the state holidays like "Victory Day" and "Day of Russia". The special importance is given to various types of civil actions aimed at countering extremism and terrorism in Southern regional communities of Russia.

Russian public authorities have recently paid special attention to strengthening civic activity in local communities, of not only patriotic, but also social orientation. In this regard, at the end of 2018, the government of Russian Federation adopted the "Concept of Development of Volunteerism (Volunteering) in the Russian Federation until 2025", in which "promotion of volunteer activities in Russia is classified as a priority area of state policy".

Currently, about 15% of Russian citizens take part in various volunteer projects, the young people being a significant portion of those citizens. Until recent times, most of the volunteer projects were funded by grants from the President of the Russian Federation and partly by various non-profit organizations. Today, the state, expanding cooperation with non-profit organizations in terms of strengthening the third sector of civil society and creating conditions for development of volunteer movement, legally allows non-profit organizations of social orientation to participate in competitions for funding from regional budgets to implement their volunteer projects.

Currently, public organizations play an increasing role in organizing civil actions and creating favourable infrastructure for civil activity manifestation of local communities in the South of Russia. Some of these organizations were formed with assistance of state authorities, while others were initiated by various social civil actors. So, with the state's assistance there were established some key civic organizations of nationwide level, for

example: Civic Chamber of the Russian Federation, Civil Society Institutions and Human Rights Council under the President of the Russian Federation, Institute of Ombudsman for Human Rights in the Russian Federation.

However, the activity of these civil organizations is evaluated ambiguously in the expert community. Some researchers note that establishment and activity of these organizations is a true step in development of Russian civil society (Gnusareva, 2008; Grib, 2010). Other researchers consider the government's initiative to create Russian civil organizations as "a bureaucratic attempt to take control of all that is considered to be civil society institutions" (Chernyshov, 2008: 34). In this regard, some researchers, questioning the civil status of these organizations, pay attention to the fact that the government, "completely determines the rules by which they operate, but constantly violates them and interferes with their activities, depriving them of any autonomy" when creating civil organizations, thereby predetermining imitation elements in their activities. In particular, researchers point out that such elements were present, for example, in formation of the Civic Chambers at Federal and Regional levels, as well as in some youth movements (Ignatiev, 2009: 137).

Establishment and activities of Russian civil society organizations are regulated by Constitution of the Russian Federation. It reinforces the right of the citizens to public enterprises for realization of their rights and legitimate interests (Constitution of the Russian Federation). The Federal Law "On Public Associations" treats public association as voluntary, autonomic, non-commercial formations created at the initiative of citizens united on the basis of common interests for implementation of common purposes specified in the Charter of the public Association. In addition, there are other Federal Laws that regulate activities of these organizations: 1) the Federal Law "On Non-profit Organizations", which states that these organizations can be established to achieve social, charitable, cultural, educational, scientific and managerial, as well as other goals aimed at achieving public goods: (On Non-profit Organizations: the Federal Law), 2) the Federal Law "On Charitable Activities and Organizations", which defines the status and main activities of these organizations.

In 2012, there was adopted the Federal Law "On Amendments to Legislative Acts of the Russian Federation regarding the Regulation of the Activities of Non-profit Organisations Performing the Functions of a Foreign Agent". Based on this law, a number of non-profit organizations operating on the territory of Russia - the NCOs receiving funds from abroad were subsequently included in the register of foreign agents. In particular, this list includes such organizations as the "Golos Association", "Memorial" - the international human rights organization, the Open Society Institute (Soros Foundation), the National Endowment for Democracy, the International Republican Institute, the National Democratic Institute for International Affairs, East European Democratic Centre, the Ukrainian World Congress, the Ukrainian World Coordinating Council, the Crimean Field Mission on Human Rights, the Levada Center, and others (Updated List of NPOs - Foreign Agents, 2016).

Currently, socially oriented public organizations arrange civil activity of population in local communities in the South of Russia. On the one hand, the "social order" for activities of these organizations grassroots from various interested social groups of the population. On the other hand, activities of organizations that deal with social problems of these population groups are largely funded by the state. In this case, the relationships between public organizations and the state are based on outsourcing principle: the state transfers to these organizations

some of its functions in social sphere.

However, according to the results of the questionnaire, the population in local communities has a dim idea about regional activities of non-profit organizations. Therefore, the respondents either found it difficult to give an opinion on these organizations, or expressed distrust of them, believing that non-profit organizations did not show their interests (Shulman, 2016). In addition, in local communities, distrust of non-profit organizations activities has recently increased even more after a certain part of them was included in the list of foreign agents. All that ultimately affects the low civic activity level in local communities initiated by various public organizations.

Recently, the local communities of Russia have seen an increase in civil activity due to participation of various social groups in protest actions organized by representatives of opposition forces from upstairs. For example, as a part of all-Russian protest against pension reform in 2018, regional branches of the Communist party of the Russian Federation organized some rallies (The Protest Against Pension Reform in the Caucasus Brought Together People of all Ages, 2018; How Rostovites Opposed Pension Reform, 2018; Residents of Nalchik Demanded a Referendum on Pension Reform, 2018; The Authorities are Very Scared: how in Crimea they are Protesting against Pension Reform, 2018). In local communities of Southern Russia representatives of non-systemic opposition occasionally waged civil fight against corruption or violating civil rights in Russia.

In recent years, in the framework of grass-rooted civic initiatives there have been increasingly developed various practices of civic engagement that help to overcome deficit of civic subjectivity in local communities of Southern Russia. Grassroots civic initiatives are mainly focused on organizing charity events aimed at helping people in difficult situations (Association of Charitable Organizations of the North Caucasus, 2016; Charity Funds in Rostov-on-Don, 2019; Charity Funds of the Crimea, 2019), and environmental actions related to protection of the environment and overcoming the consequences of Russian "garbage culture" (A Massive Environmental Action Took Place in Crimea, 2019; "Clean Thursday" Action in the Capital of Adygea, 2018; The All-Russian Ecological Action "Days of Protection against Ecological Hazard" has Started on the Don, 2019).

In the framework of grassroots civic initiatives, there are also organized civil protest actions, initiated in local communities by informal leaders. Experts state that the main reasons for this kind of civil actions aimed at solving social problems at regional or local levels are connected with the problems of excessive social inequalities, infringement of rights and interests of some social groups, violation of environmental standards in construction of industrial facilities or creation of unique natural territories (In the Rostov Region, Deceived Equity Holders Marched in Protest, 2017; Protests Began in the Crimea, 2019; People Want to Breathe, 2018; Activists from Kabardino-Balkaria Called the Action in Magas Unique, 2018).

In general, despite the recent civil activity increase in the South of Russia, the civil activity level of local communities is still low. To a certain extent, this is due to the widespread policy of so-called "supervisory" civil activity in Russian society, which, as experts say, is initiated by state authorities. The state, defining and regulating the areas of civil activity of the population, gives civil activists the right to organize appropriate civil

practices in local communities as part of this policy. Such "authorized involvement" of population in civil activity under supervision of state authorities is accompanied by a discrepancy between the form and content of civil activity itself. Formally, civil activity, as noted by the young participants of the focus groups, seems to be there, but "there is no civil activity in terms of content, since all the actions are carried out for the sake of imitating this activity, for the careers of officials and some young people who have realized in time what personal benefits can be derived from demonstrating false solidarity with the state".

In this regard, experts also believe that such a formal civic activity, carried out under simulation programs, often discards interests and opinions of the youth. In this regard, youth activists usually demonstrate civil activity as a springboard for further career growth. As a result, there is no desire to change the current social situation for the better and civil activity becomes a tool for achieving personal goals. Participants of the focus groups also drew attention to the fact that civic activity of young people sometimes hides fashion trends and desire to "hype" associated with "self-promotion" in social networks.

In addition, analysis of the results of sociological research has revealed some other factors that negatively affect the level of civic activity in local communities. First of all it is perception of inability of ordinary citizens to influence the social situation and decision-making in the regions and municipalities; then, social inequalities, which form a sharp sense of social injustice and social apathy; third, the underdevelopment of regional civil society institutions; fourth, there is a low level of public confidence in state and municipal authorities.

At the same time, experts draw attention to connection between lack of public confidence in the government, caused by the state's unwillingness to listen to the voice of civil society, and citizens' perceptions of inability to influence management decisions in the regions. In the focus groups participants also noted that "the government does not listen to its people". Therefore, those who see that their civic activity leads to nothing, and sometimes even adds problems to their lives, lose any desire to display it. Thus, civil passivity in local communities is caused not so much by people's lack of desire to show civic activity, but by their perceptions of its social inefficiency, due to inability of the population to influence regional social situation and management practices.

The reasons for civil passivity in local communities also lie in specifics of Russian mentality. "The thing is," as the focus group participants noted – "that many people don't have a sense of citizenship and responsibility for their actions. People are probably not satisfied with everything in this life, but they have no special desire to be active in order to reach social changes." Moreover, "there is some fear: you don't want to be arrested for going to a rally, such a deal is then reflected negatively in your biography, and therefore it is easier not to do anything."

## V. CONCLUSION

Sociological analysis and interpretation of empirical results of sociological research have significantly expanded the understanding of civic activity in local communities in the South of Russia. The peculiarity of this

activity is that it is initiated mainly from upstairs by state authorities or various public organizations. Civil activity initiated by the state authorities is manifested primarily in population's participation in civil and patriotic actions aimed at demonstrating national unity and social solidarity of Russian society.

The public authorities have recently paid attention to strengthening not only patriotic civic activity, but also social orientation of local communities, providing assistance to volunteer activities, including partnerships with socially oriented non-profit organizations. Currently, in the South of Russia there are various non-profit organizations that attract people to solve problems of various social groups, mobilizing their civic activity in local communities. However, the results of sociological research indicate that population of local communities has a vague idea of non-profit organizations and is distrustful of their regional activities, believing that such organizations do not express their interests.

In local communities in the South of Russia, there is also an increase in civil activity due to participation of people in civil protest actions organized from upstairs by representatives of opposition forces. The protest actions are at social injustice, infringement of civil rights and corruption in the echelons of power.

The local communities in the South of Russia are increasingly developing various practices of civic engagement within the framework of grassroots civic initiatives aimed at charitable actions to help people in difficult situations and environmental actions related to environmental protection and formation of environmental culture. In the framework of grassroots civil initiatives, there are also run civil protest actions, organized in local communities by informal leaders, aimed at solving social problems related to excessive social inequalities, infringement of individual social groups' interests, violation of citizens' rights, and non-compliance with environmental standards by various industrial organizations.

At the same time, according to the results of sociological research, in general, despite the recent increase in civil activity, its level is still low in local communities of Southern Russia. On the one hand, this is due to so-called "Supervisory policy" - implementation of civil activity initiated by state authorities, which often has an imitative character. On the other hand, the low level of civic activity in local communities is due to perceptions of inability to influence the social situation and managerial decision-making; social inequalities, which form people's feelings of social injustice and social apathy; underdevelopment of regional civil society institutions; and low level of public confidence in state and municipal authorities.

The reasons for civil passivity in local communities also lie in specifics of Russian mentality. Though in its structure a large role is played by ideas, values and attitudes of statist-paternalistic nature, the sprouts of civil consciousness are still struggling to break through them.

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