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CIVIL ACTIVISM IN LOCAL COMMUNITIES: MOTIVATION OF PARTICIPANCE, PERFORMANCE AND RESOURCE RELATIONSHIP

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Abstract

This article considers conditions and factors of civil activism at micro-local and meso-levels of social relations. Civic activism is viewed as attitudes and practices oriented towards solving social problems of different levels through social creativity and self-organization of citizens. Self-organization is the process of establishing direct ties and contacts between citizens to solve personal and socially significant problems. Participation in collective actions, associated with provision of amenities and assistance, becomes increasingly widespread among representatives of local communities in cases of legal insecurity and a deficit of material and information resources. Initiators of collective action are citizens themselves, their neighbors in the house (street), representatives of public organizations, less often - representatives of government bodies or management companies. As results of the survey showed, respondents are more willing to engage in any initiatives organized by others than to act as their immediate initiator. Basic motives of civil activism are a pursuit of preventing social environment of a residential territory from degradation, helping people in a difficult life situation and satisfying needs for altruistic and collective types of behavior. Actors of social work consider it to be quite efficient in terms of social significance (e.g. improvement of apartment houses and surrounding areas, improvement of a legal base, educational effect for the younger generation, preservation of cultural traditions) and personal development (e.g. acquisition of experience, specific knowledge, competencies in the field of public benefit, multiplying social capital, increasing self-esteem, improving self-esteem, obtaining diplomas, letters that can be useful for career advancement).

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Keywords: Civil activism, self-organization, social participation, activist mindsets, local community.



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1. Introduction

One of the main challenges of Russian society that impedes social consolidation is the weakness of local communities and an absence of a local identity. It is especially apparent in urbanized territories. Local communities are often artificial constructs, the limits and structure of which nominally coincide with the administrative and territorial division of the territory into municipalities. Besides, a local identity can be far less significant than local-group identities or, on the contrary, macro-regional self-identities, while the level and intensity of communications between participants do not allow us to discuss any strong ties, running through the social space of local communities.

As a result, people are incapable of uniting for social initiatives aimed at addressing individual and collective issues. As shown by the Levada Center poll (June 2016), 54% of respondents say they cannot influence the situation in their town (district) and another 30% admit that they have little influence. Even at the level of a neighborhood, the proportions of respondents who say they have no or little influence on the situation constitute 23% and 32% respectively, i.e. the majority of the sample. Subjective assessments of individual responsibility for a situation are distributed in the same way. Their value is lower than the value of the influence indices (Responsibility and Influence, 2016).

The development of civil activism is of particular importance for the development of local communities. Firstly, it contributes to the accumulation of individual and group resources and the growth of social capital volume. Secondly, it creates a feeling of social responsibility in people. Thirdly, it creates a base for social innovations and the transformation of a local community. Fourthly, it increases the efficiency of municipal management by creating a competitive environment.

2. Problem Statement

The study of practices of civic activism in the social space of local communities makes it possible to identify the key mechanisms of social integration and the formation of a local identity in the base of which aren't external, administrative-political factors, but internal factors based on the values and interests of participants. Accordingly, the identification of the mechanisms underlying the activist practices allows us to justify and clarify the universal mechanisms of social self-organization, integration and solidarity, to contribute to the sociology of everyday life, the sociology of practices, the sociology of management. The identification of the nature of the activist attitudes and motivation of the participants makes it possible to extend the practice of civic activism from the micro-level to the meso-level of social relations.

3. Research Questions

- identification of the level of public participation at the level of local communities;
- analysis of activist installations;
- analysis of the specifics of motivation of civic activism, determination of dominant motives and incentives;
- identification of socially and personally significant results of activist practices.

4. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study is to consider the leading motives and the most effective incentives for civic activism in local communities, to identify the mechanisms underlying the activist practices, the socially and personally significant results of civic engagement.

5. Research Methods

The paper is based on the results of the authors' empirical study. The first stage – a wide-scale questionnaire survey – was conducted in Belgorod region in November-December 2015. The sample encompasses 1002 respondents and represents the sex, age and settlement structure of the region's population. The second stage – a series of half-structured interviews – was conducted in Belgorod and Voronezh regions in October-November 2016 (N=30). Deliberate sampling implied the selection of people with experience of civil activism in public and private spheres during the last two years.

The authors have used a method of a questionnaire survey and an interview to collect primary sociological information. The results of the questioning have been processed by the DA-system program product (Determination data analysis, version 5.0). The acquisition and visual analysis of distribution tables have been a basic mode of data processing. "One-dimensional tables output" and "two-dimensional tables output" have been the auxiliary modes of the program used for data processing and analysis. Qualitative analysis of the result of the interviews has been based on the grouping of respondents' answers, depending on the key topics of interview's guidance. These topics involve the need for self-organization, mechanisms of joining socially useful activity and motivation, a socially useful result, a person-centered result, the attitude of authorities to a social initiative, the role of social networks and ICT in a social initiative.

6. Findings

Nowadays, the issue of civil activism is quite intensively studied in sociology. The research devoted to the establishment of civil society in Russia is of great methodological importance for the elaboration of the activism concept. Thus, the works aimed at studying the development of civil structures in Russia (Galkin, 2008), social capital of civil society in particular regions (Zabolotnaya, 2008), monitoring of civil society (Kovaleva, Mersiyanova & Yakobson, 2008), specifics of civil society in Russia (Makarychev, 2008), and the essence of modern civil society in Russia (Petrenko, Gradoselskaya, 2009) are of considerable interest.

The concept of social networks and the work on creating network structures in Russian society has a significant heuristic potential for understanding the essence of activism both in the private and public spheres.

Thus, S.Yu. Barsukova studies a special type of social integration in her works: Reciprocity, which implies the exchange of gifts on a non-market basis. The basic elements of the inter-family exchange of gifts are economic mutual assistance, cooperation of efforts and means, creation of informal crediting, the establishment of stable relations and contacts as both equal and dominant, the confirmation of a social

status of family, moral support within a framework of a network, emergency psychological assistance, translation of ethical values, religious and ethnic traditions (Barsukova, 2004).

O. Bezrukova uses sociological and economic approaches to studying the phenomenon of network structures (Bezrukova, 2011). M. Granovetter has proved that weak ties are much more efficient than strong ties for many social objectives including job searches. He called this effect “the force of weak ties” (Granovetter, 1973).

G.V. Gradoselskaya has analyzed the distribution of households according to their participation in exchange and receiving various resources (i.e. money, food, labor etc.) basing on a graph theory and revealed such categories as “exchangers”, “donors”, “consumers” and “independent” (Gradoselskaya, 1999).

I.E. Steinberg studied the networks of family social support and treated them as a special kind of an informal special institute, which occurred spontaneously on the basis of blood kinship and the friendly ties of family members, their mutual interest and personal choice (Steinberg, 2004).

M. Törrönen analyzes the socio-economic dimension of reciprocity and economic resources, which usually form a basis for survival and support of other resources, by the example of Finnish families with small children. The author emphasizes that reciprocity is associated with both interpersonal and social relations as well as with people’s interpretation of their personal well-being (Törrönen, 2015).

Particular manifestations of activism in the public sphere and people’s self-organization, including ecological activism, are actively studied by such authors as A.A. Kuzmina, O.N. Yanitskiy, O.A. Usacheva (Kuzmina, Yanitskiy, 2002).

Theoretical bases of social self-organization have been elaborated within a framework of sociology of public movements (Touraine, 1978). In numerous publications of recent years, much attention is paid to the formation and development of civil society structures in the regions of Russia, the willingness of the population to join their activities (Petuhov, 2002; Kovaleva, Mersijanova & Jakobson 2008; Mersijanova, 2009; Mersijanova, Jakobson, 2011; Halij, Aksanova, 2010); the practices of solidarity and mutual assistance at the level of local communities, the relationship between solidarity and civic activism were analysed (Zvonovskij, Merkulova, 2015; Klimova, 2013; Reutov, Reutova & Shavyrina, 2016; Shtejnberg, 2004). In a series of works, there was analysis of an institutional base of social self-organising - the activities of NCOs, which are considered as an indispensable mechanism of reduction and formation of the system of “global welfare” (Sidorina, 2010; Kemp, 2005). At the same time, the institutionalization of the process of self-organization of citizens is seen as an ambivalent factor - not only facilitating the organization of collective actions, but also preventing the inclusion of potential participants who are not ready for routine forms of civic participation (Batanina, Lavrikova, 2014).

A lot of publications are devoted to the development and functioning of the institute of territorial public self-government in the Russian regions, with all its conflicts and limitations, imitating nature, control over local administrations, lack of real asset, resource scarcity, distrust of the population, lack of contacts with business structures and the media and etc. (Gajdukov, Reutov, 2012; Kiseleva, 2008; Ljahov, 2015; Reutov, Reutova & Shavyrina 2015; Fomin, 2012).

The authors treat civil activism as a set of mindsets and practices, focused on studying social issues of various levels through social creation and people’s self-organization.

Self-organization is a process of establishing immediate ties and contacts between people for addressing local issues and functional objectives, with the perspective of their actualization after the achievement of previous goals. There may be many and diverse bases for self-organization – starting from defending one's rights and ending with recreation. Self-organization enables the actualization of “weak” ties, transforming them into “strong” ties or the creation of new ties of various kinds. The Internet, including the web of “social networks”, is a significant resource for self-organization; the overwhelming majority of Internet users and most Russians are its nominal participants.

The authors have identified the level of social participation and activist mindsets.

In the process of self-organization, one often actualizes collective identities, which go back to the traditional elements of the social structure-socio-demographic, professional, socioeconomic strata, ethno-confessional groups, territorial communities, commercial and non-profit organizations. Sometimes the integrating feature may be more specific - for example, car owners who are opposed to increasing the transport tax and the cost of renting the land under the garage, or the parents of children with cerebral palsy or Down's syndrome, seeking inclusive education for their children.

The groups of interests, formed in these cases (groups of actions, pressure groups), which are united, as a rule, of clearly unlimited number of individual participants, who are seeking to achieve group purposes on the basis of resources consolidation, acquire a pronounced network nature, and communication among their participants has a multi-vector and diverse form and content.

The amount of the subjects, simultaneously participating in the communications for the occasion of one or another interest, as well as their nature, is also often difficult to determine. So, observing the interaction of "power" and "the public", one can see the lack of monolithicness of these actors to be traced in the structure of "the public" groups with specific interests, only situationally united with other participants, realizing only their own ambitions on the wave of solving the social problem, and altruists.

In the system of "power", there is the same diversity of intentions, conditioned by corporate (departmental) interests.

In this case, the categories of "public" and "authorities" may also overlap. Thus, NCOs can be closely related to power; among officials, there may be people who refused to follow the principles of corporate solidarity and who supply insider information to public activists, etc. Researchers note a significant role of "authorities" and "the public" of "intermediaries" in the communication, as most often they are municipal deputies in urban communities, as well as administrative units for working with NCOs, "trusted" public funds and civil organizations, public chambers (Klimova, Klimov, 2015).

As shown by the results of the wide-scale survey, the level of social participation at the micro-local level is quite high. Thus, half of respondents (49.40%) have somehow participated in some collective activities with people living in the same house (in a village – in the same street) over the last year. It was usually associated with cleaning and improvement of the territory (27.54% of respondents). 17.07% participated in various forms of collective mutual help (including whip-round and clothes collection), 12.67% took part in signature collection, collective appeals to authorities and other official establishments. 8.18% of respondents were involved in organizing holiday and 1.90% took part in protest actions (i.e. meetings, pickets).

Table 01. Party activity with housemates

Participation in party activity with housemates (fellow-villagers, living in the same street)	%
Didn't have to	50.60
Cleaning, territory improvement	27.54
Collective mutual assistance (including collection of money, things)	17.07
Device and execution of holidays	8.18
Collection of signatures, collective appeals to authorities and other official institutions	12.67
Actions of protest nature (rallies, pickets)	1.90

One can refer to these forms of collective actions as peoples' self-organization since the initiative of participation (at least, in the respondents' opinion) usually comes from "below". In most cases, the initiators were the neighbors of respondents (as reported by 45.51% of respondents); however, in 25.15% of cases, these were respondents who initiated these events. Social organizations were mentioned as initiators by 17.17% of the respondents. The role of other external bodies – i.e. authorities and management companies – in arranging collective actions was mentioned by 10.58% and 8.78% of respondents, respectively.

57.19% of respondents have participated in collective activities, outside purely professional activities, with their coworkers during the last year. The most popular forms of collective actions were the organization of mutual help (including whip-round and clothes collection) (23.05% of respondents), cleaning and improvement of the territory (22.65%), organization of corporate holidays (21.96%). Signature collection and appeals to authorities were quite rare (5.39%).

The initiatives for arranging collective actions at places of residence were usually centralized: 40.31% of respondents involved reported that they were employed in the company's management, 9.34% said they were involved in the company's trade union committee and 7.44% mentioned they were representatives of authorities. However, the mobilization "from below" was also quite frequent: 34.43% of respondents reported that they were stimulated to participate in collective actions by their co-workers while 19.90% of respondents were the initiators themselves. Thus, one cannot say that collective actions of the representatives of working teams are only mobilized and initiated "from above". Many of them are autonomous and, in this case, might well be truly solidary practices.

Collective actions arranged at the macro-local level (together with "other town and village inhabitants") were less frequent than the forms of collective participation at the level of neighborhoods or working teams. Nevertheless, 36.82% of respondents had an experience of participation in such activities during the last year. These activities usually involved cleaning and improvement of the territory (reported by 16.77% of respondents) and collective mutual help (including whip-round and clothes collection) (11.28%). Holiday organization (9.68%), signature collection and collective appeals to the authorities and other official establishments (7.09%) were less frequent, whilst participation in protest actions was quite rare (1.20%).

Socially active people play a prominent role in the organization of collective actions at a macro-local level. In 37.11% of cases, from the viewpoint of respondents (the participants in events), they were the initiators of collective actions. Social organizations occupy the second place by their significance

(their role was reported by 27.11% of respondents). 21.05% of respondents participated in collective actions at the macro-level, with their initiative being as leading initiative. Quite a small part of respondents (18.95%) mentioned the authorities as initiators of collective actions.

As the wide-scale survey shows, activist mindsets are quite pronounced in most respondents. 68.23% of respondents admit they would join some social initiative and come into contact with unknown or barely known persons for this purpose. 19.78% of respondents report they are not ready for it. A considerable proportion of respondents (32.07%) rely on personal motives in this aspect – i.e. they would do it if their rights were violated. Altruistic motives are less frequent, but they also exist. Namely, 16.68% of respondents would join social initiatives if the rights of other people were violated. And lastly, almost one third of respondents (30.57%) would rely on the need for addressing some social issue in this case.

Personal readiness for the manifestation of civil activism is at a little lower level than that which was declared by most respondents. Only 26.55% of respondents reported clearly that they were not ready to offer social initiative to the association of previously mentioned unknown or barely known people; another 14.17% found it difficult to answer. Thus, the rest 59.28% of respondents would show activist qualities if necessary. Like in the previous case, the violation of personal rights (reported by 27.45% of respondents) and the need for addressing a social issue (27.45%) are the leading incentives of social activism. Purely altruistic reasons associated with the violation of other people's rights are reported by 12.87% of respondents.

Table 02. Motives for participation in public initiatives

Motives for participation in public initiatives	%
Not ready for this	19.78
I can do it in case of violation (infringement) of my rights	32.07
I can do it in case of violation of the rights of others	16.68
I can do it if it is necessary to achieve the solution of some social problem	30.57
It is difficult to answer	11.89

A mindset of most respondents, concerning the priority of “strong” ties as a source of additional resources, is a substantial value limitation to activism in the public sphere. First of all, these are family members and relatives, with 68.36% of respondents relying on their aid. 43.31% of respondents would turn to friends and acquaintances for assistance. The overwhelming majority of respondents do not actually treat all other social ties as Social Capital. Thus, 8.18% of respondents would resort to the help of co-workers while 6.69% of respondents would use the assistance of neighbors. It is characteristic that despite the inherent paternalism of the Russian people, a negligible proportion of respondents (4.69%) count on state (municipal) bodies and establishments to help them and only 2.89% count on social organizations. Besides, most people are convinced that it is impossible to receive assistance from anyone at all. As reported by 62.67% of respondents, it is the person himself or herself that is the only resource for addressing his or her issues. Undoubtedly, most people also count on their relatives to help them. However, the choice of this viewpoint is quite telling and clearly indicates that Russian society is divided in this regard.

Incentives and motives of activism.

The results of the wide-scale survey show that more than 40% of the Belgorod region population does not have real stimulus for cooperation or these incentives are sporadic. Thus, only 10.52% of respondents report that they constantly face situations which demand coordination of their efforts and resources; 47.80% report that these situations are quite frequent. 12.46% report they do not face these situations, and 29.21% report these situations are rare.

Activist mindsets are mostly conditioned by personal and family problems. 35.78% of respondents point to their priority (among those who reported that there are those who faced situations that made them cooperate). However, respondents probably do not have enough human capital to solve difficulties on their own. A slightly smaller part of respondents reported communitarian stimulus for cooperation. A little more than one third of respondents (35.21%) reported the balance of private and communitarian stimulating motives.

Material problems are the leading stimulus of activism in a private sphere – this is reported by 47.76% of respondents (among those who reported a stimulating role of personal and family problems). Insufficient information resources – i.e. need for advice and consultations on various issues – occupy the second place, which is reported by 22.87% of respondents. “Value” motivation is typical for 18.86% of respondents who have necessity to associate in some business or hobby. For 14.06% of respondents, the situations that stimulate cooperation to address private issues are associated with the violations of their rights or the rights of their family members. 13.91% of respondents need help in house-keeping. Finally, 8.04% of respondents from this group do not have enough resources of their own to look after children or elderly people.

A pursuit of improving the territory and the environment in a micro-district, a town or village dominates in the group of respondents for whom communitarian problems are incentives for cooperation (reported by 66.78% of respondents). The violation of collective rights of residents or members of a working team by authorities, owners or a company’s management is also a significant stimulus (37.74%).

The results of the interviews with respondents who have the experience of public or private activism witness that the leading motives of social participation are associated with the improvement of local neighborhood territories and places of common use in apartment houses and help people in a difficult life situations (such as the disabled and people who have lost their relatives).

“Our house has 4 entrances. We wanted to install energy meters, because heating bills were too expensive. We decided that it would be convenient to install a meter (a woman, 76, a pensioner); our neighborhood (let our neighborhood be akin to small towns) has seen the cases of vandalism for half a year. Some criminals were constantly breaking the house intercom. We discussed this issue and settled it together. We had the house intercom repaired and now we are fine” (a woman, 65, a pensioner); “well, everything is unclear with regard to capital repair - the entrance is falling apart, it is always dirty there, all the mailboxes are battered. We have no idea who must keep it in order, clean, and in repair. Nobody wants to do it, though it should be done” (a man, 25, a lawyer); “there are cases when someone needs help – a sick person or veterans who need help. Then people are united and look for associates who are also concerned about the situation” (a man, 22, a municipal officer).

Socially and personally significant results of activist practices are as follows.

The improvement of social infrastructure and relations between people is a dominant socially useful result of activism in public and private spheres mentioned by respondents during the interviews.

“We have cleaned the house up. We are pleased to see our entrance clean and groomed (a woman, 59, a laboratory assistant); “the house is repaired, the road, parking place, and flower beds are made, I think we have done a lot. Now, we are helping children” (a woman, 49, pensioner); “We have the courtyard improved and capital repairs made”. It is amazing that young and old people work together and clean up the place where they live (a woman, 46, an official).

Some respondents also indicated on the educational effect – the impact of socially useful practices on children and youth. “This is child education in the traditions of the Russian culture, maintaining children’s health, the improvement of educational system” (a man, 41, a university professor); “I was satisfied because everything becomes better and more beautiful. Children become safer. We have taught young generation to be polite and friendly.” (a man, 50, a deputy headmaster).

Some respondents point to the organizational effect – the creation of a team of associates: “we have gathered a team of associates and prepared the legal actions that would regulate our work. We are still at the initial stages of our mission, but some steps had been done” (a woman, 22, a public officer); “We always help each other. We have no conflicts. We always keep them clean. We are always praised for them. We are always ready to help other people; we always come together and have a talk. In general, we are a very friendly team” (a woman, 20, a student)

Many respondents do not distinguish between socially useful and person-centered result of activities and mark the satisfaction in terms of activity or gratitude from others. Sometimes, this is formalized recognition in the form of certificates and wins in competitions: “our student’s council has a lot of awards, we also have certificates. We participate in various competitions – district, zonal and regional. Of course, we adore doing these things” (a woman, 20, a student).

A person-centered result is largely associated with self-respect and satisfaction from the achievement of a social result. This is often recognition by other people and respect: “Well, this is, indubitable respect for other people. Now, I have a different opinion about myself. I am not an ordinary inhabitant who does nothing but judges other people. I do something and I am proud of it” (a woman, 27, a landscape designer).

Some respondents report they have acquired some experience, specific knowledge, and competences in the sphere of socially useful activity: “I have found friends with the same interests; at last, I have become successful as a manager. I have received priceless experience of management that I will use further. This is the ability to deal with different people: politicians, artists, athletes etc. (a man, 22, a municipal officer). For some respondents, wider communication, new ties, career growth, and formalized recognition in the forms of awards and wins in competitions etc. are significant: “I have acquired some knowledge about how social work is organized. It has been an interesting experience of social communication with people of various occupations and social strata, though united by a single goal. In the end, it turned out that it was a necessary experience. We have succeeded in doing small good things - this is certainly encouraging” (a man, 42, a university professor); “we take part in..., get graduation papers, we are very pleased” (a woman, 56, a social worker and a university professor).

In some cases, the authors observed disappointment in social activity due to the lack of significant results and communication barriers with other people: "we have achieved nothing. We are not paid... It is difficult to deal with people, to understand them" (a woman, 68, a pensioner).

7. Conclusion

The range of social participation at the micro and macro-local level is quite high; the basic forms of civil activity manifestation are improvement of the territory of residence and collective mutual help. The representatives of local communities join the practices of self-organization because they try to prevent the social environment of their residential territory from degradation and to make it more comfortable, to help people in a difficult life situation, and to satisfy needs for altruistic and collective types of behavior. However, the participation of most people in self-organized practices is sporadic and, it mobilizes from the outside – by the most active representatives of territories and companies. However, most representatives report they are ready to join some social initiative as ordinary participants or – less frequently – as leaders. The analysis of the narratives of the interviews with socially active persons has shown that, with few exceptions, social work gives its authors both socially significant and personally oriented results: the development of communicative skills, acquaintance with interesting people, new friends, higher self-esteem (i.e. being proud for the actions, respect of other people) and better health.

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