

Structural Activity Aspect of Social Activity in Russian Society

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Abstract

Background/Objectives: Social activity indicates the level and nature of social subjectivity, the possible strategies for integration and participation in social processes or social apathy, alienation and even social exclusion. **Methods/Statistical analysis:** This research is based on the ideas and findings of contemporary sociological science, related to the implementation of the paradigm of social action. In this study we relied on such fundamental ideas as the concept of social capital by P. Bourdieu, structuration theory by Giddens, social subjectivity by A. Touraine. **Findings:** Although the considered aspect of opportunities is limited by existing targeted programs and certain forms of impact on the legal legislative activity, the implementation of information technology (e-government), creation and operation of the various associated structures of regional public chambers enable to monitor the public mood and reduce the gap between the public daily life planes. Social activity transforms from a means of manifestation of an attitude to the society and a way of social self-assessment into a factor of influence on various social processes. Far from exaggerating the importance of changes occurring in the sphere of social activity, we can say that Russian society is creating a new social space which engages social activity of the population, along with the social, economic and political parameters for powerful social development, the catalyst for social change. **Applications/Improvements:** Russian social structure is fragile and unstable, still demonstrates the parameters of the transition state, that is why the study of social activity is becoming more urgent.

Keywords: Consolidation, Social Activity, Socially Active Groups, Social Development

1. Introduction

The recent period of social transformations in Russian society has not delivered clear outcomes. Nevertheless, it is possible to draw some conclusions, basically due to the fact that now the system cannot return to its previous state, main market and democratic institutions have been formed, and new social groups have emerged, whereas the old, traditional ones have changed their status. This all denotes the formation of a stratified social structure of the society.

It is hard to deny the destructive impact of spontaneous processes, reforms and high costs of institutional implementation, especially when borrowing foreign models,

without taking into account certain specific features when adopting them to Russian conditions. However, this points to the fact that the current form and condition of the Russian society requires social changes. In reality, the problem boils down to what the nature of the changes will be like, what outcomes the social development is to have, what direction the changes will take, and what methods will be used to form new social structures and institutions.

In the context of collapsing Soviet heritage, social changes cannot be external, introduced from outside, but should adapt to the internally generated sources of development. The process of the social transformation of Russian society has shown that it is impossible to build

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a new social and political system within a short period of time; the success of undertaken changes is largely determined by social activity of the society aimed at the adoption and implementation of changes and, more importantly, how these changes are introduced not only on the macro- and meso-levels, but also on the social micro-level.

That is why we cannot state that the completed period of radical social changes and social transformations means that social activity of the population has faded, and there are no disturbances in the social life. From our perspective, the problems of the social development of Russian society are grounded in social activity which “pervades” social interaction, social structure of the society, determines the attitude towards social institutions, and becomes the focus of interests of different social groups.

Social activity of the population inherently indicates the level and nature of social subjectivity, the possible strategies for integration and participation in social processes or social apathy, alienation and even social exclusion, although we should note here that Russian social structure is fragile and unstable, it still demonstrates the parameters of the transition state. One cannot ignore the fact that in the situation of considerable social inequalities, social and regional disparities, the loss of confidence in the institutions ensuring order and stability, social activity may either become socially constructive and productive, or trigger the processes of social negation, transition from the forms of the civilized protest to social rebellion and blind destruction.

Divergent trends of the phenomenon prove that Russian society has ambiguous perception of social activity and socially active groups. This resembles the situation of ambivalence, when one has opposite feelings not only to the same person, but also to a certain quality of social relations. Here, we can say that the society demonstrates arrhythmic social activity, which is characterized by relatively calm periods alternating with “stormy” ones.

Of course, social activity cannot be reduced to a common denominator, provided that in a society with conflicting interests and values, the activity may only take form of a series of local social actions. In addition, the combination of the constructivism and negation elements provokes a systemic social conflict. In other words, the authorities act rather cautiously, while the public perceives the activity as a strategy bearing possible social risks, and which is less preferable than the adaptive practices developed over the years of reforms.

We can state that in Russian society with weak social ties, disintegrated social life, it is hard to link social activity with the social capital of the society, with what actually increases social trust and provides perspectives of social consolidation. The contradictory interpretation of social activity stems not only from its ambivalence, being vague and situationally driven. To the contrary, post-reform experience clearly shows that social activity is essential to maintaining political stability and economic prosperity of the society.

Firstly, the degree of social activity determines how well the society is ready to perhaps difficult, but necessary social changes. Secondly, without widespread social activity, some groups tend to pursue narrow parochial interests, contradicting with the common national goals.¹ Thirdly, Russians are getting more reasons to believe that it is an active attitude to events and processes occurring in the country which increases their ability to influence these processes, and makes them prepared for the possible social crisis.

While the Soviet society seemed to be united due to the regulated social activities, the most obvious contradictions in the modern Russia are the breaks in the former social relations and inheriting what can be called a fear of regulating the social institutionalization, a fear of introducing subjects of social activity into the sphere of public life.

Considering various forms of social activity, we can conclude that Russian society has worked out certain forms of social activity; however, there are prerequisites for the development of social initiatives and improving the operation of social institutions. Giving such a conservative estimate, we do not mean that social activity as a regular massive capacity shown by various social groups for activities, including social changes aimed at creation or destruction of social institutes may be based on a solid empirical basis. This requires a systematic sociological analysis based on the evaluation of the approaches used in modern sociology, as well as introducing, formulating fundamentally new conclusions on the status and prospects of social activity in Russian society. Thus, we can say that this problem has explicit theoretical and methodological aspects and can be of quite a high social and practical impact.

2. Review of the Literature

The analysis of the works related to our research shows that sociological science has worked out the definition of

social activity as a means of social change, an expression of a degree of social subjectivity, and, consequently, these works are devoted to various aspects of this phenomenon: organizational, social, political and legal. Sociology has been addressing the issues of social activity from its very beginning. In classical sociological science,^{2,3} social activities are understood as a state of transition from a traditional to modern society, due to the absence of strict division between social groups and classes, which promotes social mobility. Regarding its structure and functions, social activity is based on the theory of social equilibrium, on the perception that social development is the result of social differentiation and becomes the main stimulus for social development. In their works R. Dahrendorf⁴ and L. Coser⁵ state that, considering social conflicts as something which starts due to objective reasons, one should also note pre-subjectification in the social activities “eliminating” the personal moment as its results reveal a relationship between beginning of the conflict and its resolution in favor of a particular social group or the society as a whole. The works written by the representatives of post-classical sociology dwell on the emergence of structural activity and subject activity approaches to social activity. According to the two key concepts formulated by P. Bourdieu⁶ – habitus and field – the driving cause of history is not a subject which would come “face to face” with an object, but the relationship between two states of the social: institutions and social structures of subjectivity. Applying the logic of practical and discursive knowledge, A. Giddens⁷ analyzes social activity on the basis of intentional or unintentional nature of an action leading to certain results. English sociologist M. Archer⁸ considers social activity in the context of the synthesis of social action agents and self-organizing structures from the perspective of morphogenesis. Defending the thesis of “the return of the man of action”, Touraine⁹ notes that it is necessary to abandon illusory attempts to analyze the social actors in isolation from the social system or, conversely, to describe the system without the “acting” persons.

3. Methodology

This research is based on the ideas and findings of contemporary sociological science, related to the implementation of the paradigm of social action. In this study we relied on such fundamental ideas as the concept of social capital by P. Bourdieu,¹⁰ structuration theory by Giddens,¹¹ social subjectivity by Touraine.⁹

The paper also reflects the ideas proposed by Russian researchers: S. Kravchenko¹² on social activity in the context of regulated openness, A.V. Dmitriev on social activity regarding conflicts development in Russian society, M.K. Gorshkov, N.E. Tikhonova on the specific features of social activity in Russian society as a model of “achieving” behavior.

The study develops the idea of the creative class by Volkov¹³ and a “paradoxical” person by Toshchenko,¹⁴ this enabling us to formulate the criteria for identifying forms of social activity and assessment of the growth prospects for social activity in Russian society.

In this study we also applied the ideas of the conflict resolution and functionalist paradigms, which focus on analyzing the impact of social activity of the population on the social development of Russian society.

Methodological tools we used to increase the reliability of the research results included the schemes of institutionalization of the public activity by I.A. Khalii as well as the works of Russian sociologists Naumova, Shkaratan¹⁵ considering the impact of social activity on the formation and reproduction of social differences in Russian society, which looks highly relevant when assessing the prospects of social activity.

The structural activity approach chosen for the methodological basis of the study seems to possess adequate analytical, explanatory and predictive potential for investigating social activity in Russian society, and there are several reasons for this. Firstly, it considers social activity as an interaction between the actors of social activities and structures, which in the context of social stratification in Russian society stems from the attitude to social activity as a social resource, depending on the access to institutional means and relations of dependence and autonomy, fragmented sphere of social microactivity as a sphere of individual and collective freedom and “systemic” activity, regarded in the mass consciousness as a sphere regulated by the government and social institutions. Secondly, social inequalities set the priority of structural constraints when choosing forms of social activity and institutions’ request for social activity. Thirdly, the transition to social subjectivity, responsibility, autonomy and competence is linked with the logic of institutional and structural changes that reinforce the regularity of social practices. Fourthly, we can state that the increase in the activity coefficient of the social reality is determined by its orientation on changing the existing social system and does not relate to the emergence of new social movements as counter-identity

movements. Thus, the incentives of social activity in Russian society result from the adoption of attitudes and values of social activity as problem solving, which implies providing equal access to institutional resources and moderating structural determinants.

4. Findings

According to the hypothesis of the study, the operation of socially and economically active groups in Russian society is defined by the current configuration of the social circumstances that influence the structural limitations dealing with a request for a social activity as the realization of social demands and social representativeness. This is reflected by the fact that none of the groups of the Russian population may be called a reference group of social activity which can set examples of “transformative” behavior, while the group interest pursues the goal of expanding access to institutional resources due to institutionalization of economic and social interests by “differentiating” possibilities in the context of the existing socio-political system. Thus, the “struggle for the rights and interests of the group” is associated with the creation of a system of delegation and representation of interests, as well as the organized social action. In this respect, social activity in Russian society is not an activity aimed at a new system of values and rules that can promote the social subjectivity as a paradigm of social activity. It can be assumed that the credibility gap in the traditional organizational forms, an emerging request for social altruism and being able to bring social benefits create the perspective for the alteration of social activity within the mobile forms of social action aimed at the local initiatives expressed through microchanges. Social activity in Russian society is also determined by the attitude to cooperation with the government agencies, with the image of the state as the carrier of the common good in the situation of conflicting interests of diverse social action groups.

Social activity is the actions of many people intended to bring social changes in the society. Sociology divides it into three semantic categories. Firstly, social activity is understood as a form of representation, expression and implementation of the social interests. Secondly, it is seen as activities aimed at improving or consolidating the obtained social positions and statuses. Thirdly, this concept is defined as the activities reflecting the ability to influence the ongoing social processes and events aiming at social changes or conservation of social relations. The

development of sociological science regarding the issues of social activity is characterized by a transition to multi-paradigmality, when social activity is interpreted as a result of social subjectivity occurring under the influence of certain structural and institutional circumstances.

Institutional, structural functional approaches, as well as structural activity and conflict resolution approaches are the central ones used for studying social activity of the population. In the structural functional model social activity is associated with the processes of social differentiation and integration, with the inclusion of new social and professional groups of people into the system of social relations by their taking certain social niches. Structural activity and conflict resolution approaches are based on the understanding of the dynamic and flexible nature of the activity during the interiorization as the ability to influence and participate in social changes. At the same time, the structural activity approach emphasizes the interiorization (realization and inclusion of structural norms as intrinsic ones to life strategies), while the subjectivity is understood as an opportunity to participate in social transformation. Social conflict resolution paradigm aims at analyzing social activity at the stages of formation, emergence and resolution of social conflicts as interaction between parties with oppositely directed vectors of social activity. Thus, from the integrative perspective, social activity is interpreted as a type of activity promoting social change through the collective subjectivity.

When we are to consider the issue of social activity in Russian society, it is necessary to proceed from the fact that social activity is “no less” social reality than integration and disintegration processes occurring in the society, activities of political elites or economic growth. Very often this reality is ignored, which makes politics inflexible and, as a result, generates frustration and disappointment in public relations. However, as sociological studies show, decay or “waves” of social activity determine not only the atmosphere of social and psychological well-being, but also the efficiency of the social and political measures initiated by the Russian government.

Being a human activity intended to transform or change the existing social structures, or to reproduce them and maintain the social relations, social activity has an influence on the situation and the mood of the masses. This leads to an idea that social activity is not just a metaphorical expression of the social power of the people, but also a real tool and a way to influence the society. The

societies with no social activity, concerned only with the preservation of current situation or those trying hard to simulate social activity with no actual changes made, accumulate a heavy burden of pending social problems, social tensions are increasing, which ultimately results in the society's living in a state of decay and disintegration.

Sociology considers the issues of social activity from various theoretical positions (its structural, institutional, structural activity dimensions). The main aspect here is that social activity represents a factor of influence and development, typical of the social relationships dynamics. Elaborating on this idea, we can say that social activity is associated with functioning of social institutions, interaction forms of the social self-organization and organization of the population. The specific feature of social activity in Russian society is that it is "traditionally" identified with social protest or social revolution. It turns out that social and evolutionary ways of development are contraindicated for Russia, whereas the population's involvement in social activity, the facilitation of this are interpreted as signs of a crisis, threatening the foundations of the society and the state.

In the post-Soviet period many politicians and ordinary people have come to share this point of view. The situation is also affected by the inertia of the past, which claims that social activity has to be regulated, not only according to the legal and political norms, but it should also be carried out under the direct patronage of the authorities, that public bodies should monitor social activity, accumulating the positive charge only and combating social spontaneity.

Proceeding from this assumption, we can say that there is a certain emphasis on evaluating social activity according to productive/destructive criteria. At the same time, social activity in the modern society is influenced by both internal processes and the processes of global interaction. Perceiving that it is necessary to analyze social activity in the context of culture, history and daily life, we cannot ignore the fact that social activity has entered the international level, that its objectives are linked to the formation of transnational structures, which prevents one from considering social activity as an isolated area of public life.

5. Discussion

The main aspect of the people's social activity is their willingness to accept social activity as a factor of social

development and influence, participation in social processes and consolidation of the society. The analysis of social activity in the context of this study revealed, firstly, that in Russian society social activity is greatly affected by the gap between the public sphere, social macro level and social micro level.

The Russians' focus on the social micro level which means narrowing the range of their social contacts to the circle of intimates, realization of self-sufficiency, and at the same time, their inability to influence the systemic processes generate effects which have a multi-dimensional influence, associated with poorer social self-organization, to a certain extent with social fatalism or reducing social activity to the political sphere only, outside which social activity loses its meaning and significance. Most Russians proceed not from the idea of individualism, but from the assumption that social activity is ineffective in present conditions, that it neither allows building the reputation capital, nor forms a vital strategy and, most importantly, it does not help to solve problems of finding one's place in life.

However, there is an opposite trend, which reflects the growing number of social altruists, those who would like to contribute to the society. However, it is not so simple – just to use the potential of these people, which, although represent a minority, can stimulate public initiative due to their high educational, qualification, professional and intellectual level. The problem is that the existing social and civic structures do not meet the expectations of the potential social activists.

Non-governmental organizations are often perceived as entities representing groups or delegating interests regardless of professional and local features which reflect everyday life of Russians. Secondly, the public's interest in their activities is greatly reduced by replicating the things they do, separation of the professionals from the potential activist masses, their "privileged" origin. The Russians' attitudes do not demonstrate any focus on social paternalism; much more significant and obvious is the fact that most Russians perceive the state as the only center of social coordination, while state's drawing back, without interfering into the situation leads to disorganization and disintegration. Of course, we cannot definitely claim that people's attitudes reflect the syndrome of social anarchism – it is more likely that social activity in the Russian society is in a transitional state, when samples and models from the Soviet period appear to be ineffective or unnecessary. However, in the conditions of underdeveloped

culture of group interests the Western analogues cannot be successfully applied, and they often do not correspond to Russian cultural and historical traditions, behavioral and mental practices.

Social activities emerging from “below” are mainly associated with reactive social interests and are often of mobilizing, short-term nature, which prevents forming a strategy for Russians’ social activity. On the other hand, this activity, aimed at microchanges, creates prerequisites for a transition to a higher level, overcoming what we can call a protest public policy and “ordinary people’s concern”. In the structure of daily life social activity of Russians suggests that the social agenda, quality of life, employment, income, the state of housing services and utilities and security require a reorientation of social activity towards participation and examination of the problems seen by the society, a significant expansion of the traditional range of social activity.

However, this transformation is hindered by poor understanding of the situation, shown by both the authorities which interpret social activity as an impingement on the sphere of their own interests and social organizations themselves, seeing the grassroots daily issues as a side factor which must be tolerated, but not included in the “agenda”.

If seen from this perspective, social activity does not have a stable social value basis, and in Russian society the concepts of “contributing to the society” and “doing good” are weakly associated with activist motivation for social values, they are often blurred and are presented as an opposition to professionalism and efficiency. At the same time, however, we can say that there is a trend for social activity coming from the idea of the forming creative class in Russian society. One registers a consensus among a certain part of the population, which implies that it is not only necessary to ensure the population’s access to participation in social life, but also take into account the evolving collective subjectivity, being part of a group that makes a certain contribution into social development, social and cultural modernization of the Russian society.

Although Russian society is experiencing a certain “consumer” saturation, we should not forget that 14.9% of Russians live in poverty;¹⁶ there is a turning point in the public mood which results from the fact that the emerging creative class actively participates in various voluntary actions, going beyond the limits of the sphere which used to be the dominant one – the Internet. An attempt of

the government to involve socially active groups of the population into the initiated social changes becomes an important stimulus for this.

6. Conclusion

Although the considered aspect of opportunities is limited by existing targeted programs and certain forms of impact on the legal legislative activity, the implementation of information technology (e-government), creation and operation of the various associated structures of regional public chambers enable to monitor the public mood and reduce the gap between the public daily life planes. Social activity transforms from a means of manifestation of an attitude to the society and a way of social self-assessment into a factor of influence on various social processes. Far from exaggerating the importance of changes occurring in the sphere of social activity, we can say that Russian society is creating a new social space which engages social activity of the population, along with the social, economic and political parameters for powerful social development, the catalyst for social change.

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