

CONSTITUENT MECHANISMS OF CITIZEN ADVOCACY IN LOCAL COMMUNITIES

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Abstract

It is possible to develop the fundamental democratic principles of the social life in Russia if people who live in municipal and rural settlements are actively involved in a capacity to manage a local community. Former-Soviet reforms have resulted in a number of questionable changes in the life support system of people living in municipal structures. On the one hand, new social institutions of municipal government and a free market economy have been developed during the reforms. The principles of democracy, freedom and law are being put gradually into people's everyday lives. On the other hand, socio-economic inequality has evolved and is increasing. The living standard of a considerable part of the population is declining so is their credibility with municipal authorities. Phenomena of disengagement and anomie, low socio-economic and political activism of the population, general discontentment with the solution of vital issues of common life mount social tension in local communities. They also force migration and other antisocial processes. The real rather than the nominal establishment of municipal administration is impossible without the citizens' informed participation in the government-led economic reforms. The development of public activity of the population, and involvement in solving local issues necessitate doing a sociological analysis of hard factors and subjective facilitations of local community functioning. It requires unfolding, the development of social arrangements of integration between various constituent territories, and relations with local authorities. The necessity to cope with disenfranchisement of the population comes into sharp focus. It can be solved by doing the groundwork for the effect of social development endeavor and real citizens' participation in community-based decision making. It is a must for the arrangement of local communities. The local community works as a structural component of a municipality. It is considered to be a unit and a component in socially organized interaction of people living within the same territory. It can promote securing local residents and approaching new citizens' ways of thinking that are necessary for the successful completion of the carried out reforms. The aim of the study is to feature the subject-matter of civic engagement in local communities. It also covers the main point of structuring a social mechanism to develop the civic engagement in solving issues at the community level. The authors used the general scientific methods of learning social phenomena, the statistical approach of studying social phenomena and processes, the method of analyzing documents, questioning to achieve this goal. The authors identified that establishing the partnership relations between municipality residents and local authorities through various forms of their social participation in solving local issues is a condition that needs to be met to enhance the importance of local self-government in the development of civic engagement of the population. The study found out the reasons why the civic engagement of the population in municipalities is weakened.

Keywords: community, local community, municipal government, citizen advocacy, civic engagement, public self-organization

1 INTRODUCTION

A warning sign for the territory development is in the downsizing of socio-territorial communities because of out-migration of people. The monitoring of the situation in the most better-endowed regions of the country convinces the authors that not only effective social and economic activities of the authorities of all levels contribute towards achieving successful results, but also an improvement in life quality of the territory depends on the involvement of local communities in solving current issues faced by them.

Scientific approaches to defining the notion of “local community” are a topic of specific practical significance, since identifying the conditions of their functioning, determining a part that local communities take in the socio-political structure of society, will allow managing the municipal bodies to be optimized. Moreover, it ensures forming the population’s will and capacity to solve vital issues for themselves, giving citizens’ sense of belonging to the community within the territory.

The sociological approach to the studies of local communities is based on the definition of this phenomenon as an important component of social system promoting integration among social agents’ interests. This conclusion is confirmed by practice. It shows that mobilization of the potential of citizen’s participation has the greatest effect not in large political movements and parties, but at the local community level, by place of residence, in small local and neighborhood communities.

The aim of the research is to identify means and conditions for promoting civic engagement in local communities at the municipal level.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

Considerable difficulties in theoretical interpretation of trends and development patterns of local communities depend on a broader diversity of the concept definition of “local community”. Numerous definitions of this notion give various interpretations of this phenomenon. The term “community” is used in a great number of researchers’ works. The main features of the concept are common natural environment and social relations.

Thus, to R. Sack’s mind, community is characterized by a personal or a social group’s attempt to control or influence people ... by delimiting and controlling a geographical area (Sack, 1983).

T. Parsons thought that community is an association of stakeholders who have a certain territorial area as the groundwork for most of their daily activities (Parsons, 1991).

F.Tönnies introduces a very important idea about community is a stable and real life together, ... a living organism. The community is the already defined in the context of the territorial specifics and sociocultural criteria (Tönnies & Harris, 2001).

Within the research, the most interesting statement seems to be made by B. Wellman. The scholar defines a community as not a local but a spatial phenomenon, which has a range of special patterns which differ from traditional ones today, for example, blurring of the lines, non-intensity of links (Wellman, 2018).

D. von Hildebrand, reflecting on the primary cause of “putting together” the community, became convinced that a territory and cooperative activities are not factors that make up a unity of inhabitants. Only those contacts that were motivated by mutual values and empathy have a higher degree of unification than ordinary relationships and “form a new actual whole considered together” that is a community (Hildebrand von, 1975).

Conclusions made by P.Carey and S.Sutton are similar. They name mutual interests, way of living, and values a unifying factor among all people of the local community (Carey & Sutton, 2004).

The issue that having been investigated, was further developed in G.W. Allport’ writings. The scientist suggested that the principle of convergence could be based for the community building process. The principle implies a new social reality starts emerging from the integrated way that individuals behave. Such policy involves the similarity of emotions, values, meanings, stereotypes that members of the emerging community share (Jenkins, 1938).

In the context of more general studies, however, identifying the mechanisms transforming a community into

the one of civic initiative groups who recognize their own territorial interests and capable of solving common problems seems to be the most interesting thing. To denote such a community, the authors use the term "local community" as a local self-government unit and a leading component of civil society.

Russian scientists' interpretations of "communities" do not contradict the assessment of foreign researchers, but completing and enriching understanding this concept.

V.A. Lapin identifies the following feature in the characteristics of local communities: people living on a certain territory are organized into communities in case, they share common interests in solving vital aspects of their life using self-government forms.

A.I. Solzhenitsyn emphasized the main condition for reforming society which is the rapprochement of the local authorities and population, participation of people in governance and habitat management. The writer attributed it to the fact that "people's daily life is dependent on four-fifths or more not of state-level affairs, but on local events that determine their existence" (Solzhenitsyn, 1998).

3 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The issues of executive authorities' activities have generated much discussion for a very long time. Living of people together, all aspects of public relations, which are systematically arranged, are regulated by executive branch interaction. The peculiarities of its manifestation result from many factors. They are specific living circumstances, social system, governmental forms and political regime, the level of socio-economic development and others.

The population's confidence is one of the important criteria to measure the efficiency of work of local self-government authorities. This integral indicator reflects the ability of authorities to promote citizens a normal standard life, to ensure better quality public and municipal services to the population (Baikov & Nevelichko, 2010).

If the civic participation in addressing local issues is taken as a leading indicator of the formed local communities, the determination of the level of formed local communities in the Russian Federation reveals the following political reality: the legal and institutional infrastructures arranged as a result of local government reform for direct civic participation in local affairs. But actually, there is no demand in public hearing, law-making initiative, territorial public self-government, citizens' meetings and conferences, etc. at present.

It should be noted that escaping initiative by the Russian population, as well as dealing with solving public issues in their own way, derive from historically established specific relationships between government and society. It was standard for Russians to accord an instinctive priority to the interests of authority rather than to those of the individual. As it was noted by Russian philosopher N. Berdyaev, the reason for this is the vast area of the Russian State. A huge territory requires strong power, authoritative authority to keep integrity, which prevents the existence of autonomous, different from state, political, and economic entities. Agreeing with N. Berdyaev's true opinion, another Russian philosopher, I. Ilyin said, that the larger the size of the territory, the stronger power needed.

Socialism not only strengthened historically established relations on the paradigm of power-society, but also introduced new features into the citizens' ethnic portrait, such as dependency, passivity, and inactivity.

At present, in the public mind of Russians, local self-government is seen as a part of state power separated from the population. This perception has become one of the chief constraints in forming civil society institutions. Sociological surveys and studies confirm that self-management of local communities' way to act is largely determined not by general situation in the country or a region, but the specifications of the local territory of residence. A severe fall of living standard and the weakening of the local authority representatives' prestige are the causes of social apathy and protest voices of the population.

R.E. Park offered the simplest and least complicated way to assess the competence and effectiveness of the community, calling poverty, diseases, crimes an important benchmark of how the community turned out to be able to provide an environment in which individuals can live (Park, 1999).

Consequently, it is fair to state that some of the significant signs determining the dysfunctional nature of local community are social and economic results of the territory and the living standard of population.

The Far Eastern regions fully prove this statement. General characteristics of the socio-economic situation of the Far Eastern regions contain a number of negative trends. First of all, they are the following: their economic and infrastructural isolation from the central part of Russia and mostly developed domestic

markets, the localized settlement throughout vast areas with low population density (1.01 people per sq.km), extremely unfavorable conditions for farming. The dysfunctional character of the existing social and economic conditions of local communities' activity in the Far Eastern regions is a destructive factor for them. The most serious consequences of the destruction are social, economic, demographic and political ones: high rate of alcoholism among citizens, rise in crime and drug addiction, population decline because of out-migration and natural decline are taking place.

The Jewish Autonomous Region tops the list of challenges the Far Eastern regions face. According to the ranks by the level of social and economic development, the Jewish Autonomous Region occupies a lower position among 85 constituent territories of the Russian Federation and refers to so called "outsider regions" (Table 1).

Table 1. Rank of socio-economic situation of the Russian Far Eastern Federal District (FEED)

No	FEED Region	Rating among RF regions			
		In 2017	In 2016	In 2015	In 2014
1	The Jewish Autonomous Region	85	85	84	82
2	The Sakha (Yakutia) Republic	21	21	21	20
3	Kamchatka Krai	55	58	57	60
4	Primorsky Krai	26	26	27	29
5	The Amur Region	51	49	51	61
6	Khabarovsk Krai	37	33	31	40
7	Magadan Region	62	60	64	
8	Sakhalin Region	17	9	7	
9	Chukotka Autonomous District	72	67	67	

Source: Rating of social and economic situation of the Russian Federation regions. Results of 2017
http://vid1.rian.ru/ig/ratings/rating_regions_2018.pdf

A result of the regional social and economic backwardness is a high level of poverty in the region (Table 2).

Table 2. Rating of the socio-economic situation in the regions of the Russian Far East following the results of 2016

No	FEED Region	Average per capita income (per month), rubles.	Average per capita expenses (per month), rubles.
	The Russian Far Eastern Federal District	36504	35310
1	The Sakha (Yakutia) Republic	39467	36950
2	Kamchatka Krai	40199	38519
3	Primorsky Krai	32506	32071
4	Khabarovsk Krai	37876	37370
5	The Amur Region	29606	29449
6	Magadan Region	46135	43054
7	Sakhalin Region	51124	49212
8	The Jewish Autonomous Region	23473	21594
9	Chukotka Autonomous District	56974	34800

Source: Basic socio-economic results of the constituent entities of the Russian Federation in 2016.

<https://nangs.org/analytics/rosstat-onlajn-sbornik-rossiya-v-tsifrah-vypusk-2017-goda-pdf>

The current living conditions of the territory are the cause of pessimism, and citizens' sense of social fatigue. The data of sociological surveys indicate the residents' disbelief in the local authorities' wish to solve the problems of the population. Hence, there can be observed citizens' low social activity and rejecting the possibility of influencing the local authorities' policy by themselves.

The heads of municipalities of local communities miss the possibility to deal with urgent problems. The unwillingness or unavailability to unite citizens on shared interests and common goals do not encourage a sense of ownership among people. This is one of the reasons for a high potential of protest voices among citizens and their intensive leaving the region (Table 3).

Table 3. Population of the Russian regions

The Russian Region	No among the regions in 2017	In 2017	In 2016	The overall growth in 2017
The Russian Far Eastern Federal District		6 182 679	6 194 969	- 12 290
The Sakha (Yakutia) Republic	56	962 835	959 689	3 146
Kamchatka Krai	79	314 729	316 116	- 1 387
Primorsky Krai	25	1 923 116	1 929 008	- 5 892
Khabarovsk Krai	36	1 333 294	1 334 552	- 1 258
The Amur Region	62	801 752	805 689	- 3 937
Magadan Region	85	145 570	146 345	- 775
Sakhalin Region	73	487 344	487 293	51
The Jewish Autonomous Region	82	164 217	166 120	- 1 903
Chukotka Autonomous District	84	49 822	50 157	- 335

Source: Population of Russian regions 2017: number, large regions of Russia and fed. County
http://www.statdata.ru/largest_regions_russia

It is possible to assume that economic difficulties should become a consolidating force unifying and rallying the population of the local community. This has always been typical for Russia: the times of severe shocks and hardship have become a period of national unity, manifestations of unselfishness and mutual support.

Although, modern expert researches identify forming the opposite peculiarities of personal moods and behavior. Social attitudes of residents are determined by an individual survival strategy that maintains residents' personal autonomy, and they do not cooperate with other people.

In difficult circumstances, people hope for relatives and friends' help. However, only a small number of interviewed citizens are ready to apply for support and help to colleagues at work and local authorities.

The results of the surveys made it possible to establish that existing social links represented by archaic structures (relatives, close friends) are signs of disconnection and individual character of society. Such archaic network structures, based on kinship and friendly relations, restrain integration processes, making citizens' alienation and self-isolation worse.

The socio-economic conditions prevailing in the region, mistrust of local authorities, disbelief in their opportunity and the will for the better change, the unavailability of the authorities themselves to arrange a dialogue with the population, to organize joint activities, displace the values of team work and altruistic solidarity. In current conditions, the effectiveness of dealing with urgent problems of the municipal community cannot depend only on local authorities' work. The municipal community itself must take an active part in these changes. Therefore, one of the main tasks of local authorities should be their active efforts to involve population in solving many issues of social and territorial communities.

The solution of social and economic problems in the region cannot depend only on work of local authorities.

The development level of the municipality and comfort of living on the territory largely means the active local communities as well. Therefore, the main task of local authorities should be searching for the most efficient methods to motivate citizens' activity.

Thus, American experts believe that the involvement of an educational institution in this process can give a strong impetus towards the further development of local communities. This kind of practice has been successfully tested in Haifa, Israel, where students and local authorities conducted a joint movement to eliminate poverty (Strier, 2011).

The lecturers of Sholom-Aleichem Priamursky State University (the town of Birobidzhan, the Jewish Autonomous Region, Russia) hold similar activities to encourage self-governing behavior and educate active citizens in future. One of the major tasks of the university is to arrange student associations based on self-organization, which give a chance to increase opportunities for young people, enabling them to achieve their full and individual potential within the educational institution (Shmurygina, Bazhenova, Bazhenov & Nikolaeva, 2015).

4 CONCLUSION

In order to start the process of forming a community, local authorities need to engage the population in a dialogue based on a common idea. Collective organization is a native essential form of interaction between societies of Slavic culture in Russia. Nowadays, the renewal of people's unifying and co-public relations is caused by the necessity to prevent a split in the process of the reform movement from the state paternalism to the individual citizens' activity, and to overcome economic problems.

Local communities building must begin with the activation of small neighborhood groups, the search for a common idea. The achievement of such an idea is possible only due to the strengthening efforts.

The motivating technology in public self-government should include two processes. The first one is the focus on a particular individual. The second is the identification and collective solution of local problems of the territory that are important for the majority of community members. This will allow the community members to provide an objective overview of the activities of local authorities and new opportunities when solving local problems working together. As a result, the community of people living on a certain territory will become a community of citizens who are aware of common interest, their ownership of the place of residence and responsibility for it.

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