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Political Activity of Russia's Internet Audience on a Regional Level as a Constituent of Civil Society

Review. *The goal of this work is the analysis of Russia's internet audience as a participant in the political communication on a regional level and its attitude towards the activity of the non-governmental public organizations as the important constituents of forming of civil society. The subject of this research includes the following components: 1. Socio-political analysis of the aspects of Russia's internet audience; 2. The details of the online activity of the responders; 3. The perception of population about the role of non-governmental public organizations in Russia; 4. Classification of the public opinion of the population regarding the role and influence of the non-governmental organizations at the regional level. Selective polling was conducted on the population of the Krasnogorsky District of the Moscow Oblast consisting of 300 people between 20 and 62 years of age, representing the working class. The author emphasizes the need for a wide range of informational forums for a two-way communication at the regional level, and encouragement of citizens to participate in the dialogue, public discussion of the national politics online, and forming of the political culture of the society.*

Keywords: *activity, politics, region, non-governmental organizations, civil society, Internet audience, interests, opinion, awareness, participation.*

Today, the development of civil society in Russia is impossible to imagine without the impact of the World Wide Web. It is believed that internet communication provides an impulse for development of civil society, encourages public disclosure and transparency of the political processes, ensures the effectiveness of the dialogue between the authorities and society, and allows collaboration directly with the targeted audiences ^[1,2]. Thus, the problematics of

the specificity of Russia's internet audience gains practical significance. They can be understood by studying such characteristics as the growth in the number of internet users, their interests and activity, disclosure and transparency of the information, influence of the state and public institutions upon the audience, etc. Our interest is in the examination of the political activity of the citizens through their attitude towards the non-governmental organizations (NGO) as influential constituents of civil society. Ac-

According to opinion of multiple authors, it is namely the NGO that should become the foundation of the civic consciousness, and the internet — the dominating and enabling power of the society. Therefore, the further study of the social activity of the citizens, their desire to take part in the political process, role and significance of the Internet as a method of realization of democratic procedures becomes an important topic.

The goal of this work is to analyze Russia's internet audience as a constituent of political communication on a regional level and its attitude towards the activity of non-governmental organizations as important constituents of forming a civil society.

The research was based on the data of the selective polling of the population of the Krasnogorsky District of the Moscow Oblast consisting of 300 people between 20 and 62 years of age, representing the working class. A comparative analysis was conducted on the statistical data from the polling of the public opinion by the Russian Public Opinion Research Center and the Public Opinion Foundation for the period of 2012–2014.

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In order to understand the specificity of the Russian internet audience, let us take a look at a few of its characteristics as a participant in the political communication. The statistical tracking of the sociological data allowed us to determine the details of the formation of the internet audience

in Russia. Thus, according to the data provided by the Public Opinion Foundation that is based on the polling of 30 thousand people Russia's monthly internet audience (those who have accessed the internet at least once per month) by the autumn of 2014 consisted of 64.4 million users. For example, in 2003 approximately 10% of the national population were using the internet, while in 2014 that ratio has reached 55%, which represents a growth in internet users by 5 times. If this trend continues, by the end of 2015 this number will reach 80 million people, or approximately 70% of the adult population ^[3].

According to the data of the information resource "RUMetrika", 87% of the users dedicate their time online to the information and search portals; 61% to the entertainment services; 46% to social; and 17% to financial online activity. The most popular types of the online activity in Russia are the following: news (77.4%), email (62.3%), weather forecast (60.5%), and search engines (48.5%). Such high level of interest of the users towards the news sites does not reflect their actual outlook on politics ^[4].

In order to underline the passiveness of the population towards political life let us take a look at the sociological data on the attitude of the Russian citizens towards politics. We can observe the following trend: in 2001 approximately 43% of the polled population was interested in politics; in 2005 only 39%; in 2011 it was 37%; by 2012 it went down to just 34%. Thus 65% of Russians are not interested in politics, structure or principles of the political life, while 91% do not wish to be involved in politics ^[5]. Therefore, approximately 2/3 of the population does not participate or pay attention to the socio-political activity.

We can conclude that the decrease in interest of the Russian citizens towards politics testifies to the overall depoliticization of the population, which in turn manifests

in the decrease of the number of supporters of all of the political and ideological institutions of the Russian Federation. Perhaps the growing propaganda of political apathy in the mass media leads to the fact that the citizens are more interested in natural disasters, criminal news, and the glamorous life of the celebrities.

For comparison, let us take a look at our own data on the specificity of the audience living in the region. There is an opinion that their number is twice as lower than in Moscow (71%), St. Petersburg (70%), and other large cities (70%) [6]. Polling had revealed that the first place in the area of mass media undoubtedly belongs to television (96%), television and radio combined — 100%, while Internet is only used by 36% of the population. The most active age group of online users is between 18–34 years of age, which represents approximately 60%. As people age that number begins to decrease. Among the citizens above 60 years of age only 8% are using the Internet. The most popular types of their online activity are entertainment (84%), news (70%), weather forecast (60%), and social (46%). The analysis reveals that the users are mostly looking over the news information briefly, not going into details, but simply want to be current on the events. In addition to that, the news sites place many other resources on their site (weather forecast, currency exchange rates, sport, advertisements), which consumes most of the visitors' time. The most interest in politics is shown by the people of the near and of retirement age with a high level of education. The politics practically has no significance for the citizens below 35 years of age with a low level of education.

Therefore, on one hand we see a growing number of Russian internet users, while on the other, a fairly low level of activity and involvement of the citizens towards the processes that take place in the modern socio-political life. This confirms the facts

on the stance of the citizens with regards to the non-governmental organizations as important subjects of forming the civil society. There is an opinion that the Russian NGO are becoming effective organizations at the regional level and exert positive influence upon the democracy in Russia [7]. Indeed, the polling of the population based on the data from the Public Opinion Foundation reveals that if in 2007 only 31% of the respondents felt that the NGO are contributing to the solutions of the pressing social issues, the percentage of people who currently have the same opinion equals 55%. The number of Russian citizens who are certain that the NGO protect the rights of the citizens and advocate public initiatives, over the last 7 years has also grown from 35% to 56%. We can also see the increase in the number (from 21% to 40%) of the citizens who believe that the NGO conduct independent monitoring over the activities of the government authorities [8].

At the same time, according to the data from the Russian Public Opinion Research Center, when asked, 59% of the respondents could not recall a name of even a single NGO. Among those that were able to name one, the most commonly mentioned was Greenpeace (16%) and other environmental organizations by 6% of the respondents. As to the charitable foundations, the most recalled was the "Gift of Life" (3%), while among the political parties the most mentioned were the "United Russia" (4%), and "The Greens" and the Communist Party of the Russian Federation (2% each). Most of those polled (40%) are certain that the work of the NGO does not affect the life of the citizens. "A third of the respondents (34%) tend to believe that there is no need for the NGO altogether, and their tasks should be solved by the government (this statement is most often made by the low-income respondents — 46%, rather than people with higher income — 26%). There are only approximately 6% of

people in the entire country who use the Internet to truly understand the current events [9].

At the same time, the sociologists from the Public Opinion Foundation have determined that over the last few years there has been a drastic change in the opinion of Russian citizens towards the international NGO such as the United Nations. Thus, in 2000 approximately 55% of the respondents had a positive opinion about the work of the UN; in 2006 only 41% have still felt the same way; currently, that number stands at a mere 24%. There has also been a change in the number of citizens who believe that the UN has a significant influence upon the international life; in 2000 it was 54%, in 2006–33%, today that number is at 34% [10].

Let us take a look at our own data on how the citizens of the Krasnogorsky District of the Moscow Oblast feel about the NGO. Majority of the participants of the pole were in sync on this statement: *NGO contribute to the solution of the social problems and development of the social sphere* — 43% agreed with this notion. *NGO protect the rights of the citizens and promote people to show initiative* — 38% agreed with this statement. *Who should contribute the most into the development of society* — 28% believe that this is the task for the NGO.

Among the priority missions of the work of the NGO the respondents believe to be the following: help to the socially vulnerable segments of the population (40%); making reforms in public infrastructure (32%); healthcare and medicine (30%); education (28%); independent mass media (26%); maternity and child services (20%); preservation of historical landmarks and culture (18%). The overall expectations of the Russian citizens pertain mostly to the solutions of the social issues.

In the course of analyzing the public opinion on the NGO we have highlighted a number of groups within the respondents

that differed in opinion with regards to the NGO. The largest of groups (“uninformed”) consisted of 42%. Its representatives were not very knowledgeable about the activity of the NGO and many of them struggled with the questionnaire. Often we came across the opinion that NGO protect exclusively the interests of their members. This group was predominantly of older individuals, people with high-school education and lower income.

The next group (“independent”) amounted to 26%. Overall they seemed more informed, but at the same time they were split in their positive and negative reasoning on the work of the NGO. They would agree that the NGO contribute to the development of the social sphere and protect rights of the citizens, but also believed that the NGO provide service only to the members of their own organization. Most of them felt that the NGO do not produce neither good nor bad results. From the socio-demographic perspective their characteristics did not stand out from the rest of the respondents.

The third group (“moderate supporters”) consisted of 19%. They expressed the most of the positive marks with the regards to the work of the NGO, but at the same time most of them believed that the NGO conduct independent monitoring over the activities of the government authorities. They held that the work of the NGO consists in providing service to the society and protecting human rights. In this group most of the participants were those who were highly educated and had greater income.

The fourth group (“active supporters”) totaled to 16%. These respondents demonstrated high level of knowledgeability and considered the NGO played just as big of a role as the government in the development of society. This group predominantly consisted of persons in an active age bracket (25–45 years of age), most of whom had high level of education and income.

This raises a question: what is the role of the internet communication within the system of government administration, political activity, and how is the civil society being formed? The analysis of the acquired results confirms a low level of political activity among the citizens and the lack of their political awareness, which testifies of the current underdevelopment of the civil society. Yet there is a real opportunity to form an active political position by filling the web with meaningful and reliable information. It is evident that the social activity of the citizens can be increased by the “moderate”

and “independent” supporters with expansion of the government information politics aimed at a clear explanation of the principles of work, functions and tasks of the social institutions and forming a positive attitude towards them. In this regard the significance of internet communication is indisputable. One of the prospects for the development of Russia can become a wide range of informational forums for a two-way communication at the regional level, and encouragement of citizens to participate in the dialogue, public discussion of the national politics online, and forming of the political culture of the society.

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