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CIVIC ACTIVITY OF YOUNG PEOPLE OF THE TYUMEN REGION*

SUMMARY. In this article we examine some aspects of the civic activity of young people in the Tyumen Region. In the region there is a situation in which, on the one hand, the involvement of young people in socially approved forms of social and political activity is very low. On other hand, young people of the region are characterized by an extremely high level of readiness to protest.

KEY WORDS. Civil activity, social and political activity, protest expectations, readiness to protest.

In autumn 2012 we now may say that the period of reform in Russia has lasted already for twenty years. Is that a long period or not? It is a negligibly small amount of time for a historical period in a country, but for young people that are now 18- 30 years old, it is a lifetime. The generation that has experienced neither the Soviet upbringing system (which includes Octobrists, Pioneers and Komsomol members) nor the Soviet economical and political system has now formed. They have matured in a context of new realities and have acquired new opportunities for self-realization, including those provided by the burgeoning civil society. But has civic engagement become an important sphere of life of modern youth? Do young people consider public participation as a form of individual self-actualization, social mobility and realization of their own ideas? And if so, what forms does the social engagement of youth take?

Social engagement is a rather ambiguous notion, in its broad sense it covers a lot of different forms of activity ranging from participation in various social practices aimed at "social wellbeing" (such as participation in public authorities, membership in social associations, volunteering, involvement in youth subcultures) to political activity like participation in the activities of political parties, electoral behavior and protest movements.

In modern research into youth social engagement there are two noticeable stresses. On the one hand, youth activity is a factor of social development and social innovations and the condition of the search for new forms of social structure. On the other hand, "redundant" youth activity which can be represented by protest behavior and radical youth subcultures is often regarded as a dangerous and socially destabilizing phenomenon that needs control and regulation. From this follows

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the willingness of authorities at different levels to create some pro-government youth organizations regulating youth initiatives. These trends are ambiguous; there is no collective opinion on them among different social groups, but first of all it is necessary to clearly realize what we are dealing with and what the main features of youth activity are [1].

Let us examine some aspects of social and political activity of youth living in the Tyumen Region*.

Altogether 50-55% of the Tyumen Region youth agree that active participation in their cities' or villages' lives can change a lot of things. But positive assessments of the prospects of youth participating in their settlements' lives are rarely followed by real involvement in social associations' work and political activity. In 2011 only 12% of those interviewed were taking part in the work of public authorities (such as labor councils or trade unions), and 8% of respondents were participating in domiciliary public authorities' work. Youth participation in non-commercial social associations is minimal and amounts only to 5% of the selection. The potential for this kind of activity is relatively weak, only 11% of those interviewed wanted to participate in social associations and social movements.

The Tyumen Region's youth is not very interested in politics and is little involved in political life. About 40% of those interviewed expressed unwillingness to participate in any form of political life (Fig. 1) Only voting can gather a relatively large number of young people (about 45%). Only 14% of respondents constantly monitor political developments. Another 39% show only little interest to the political events in the country and the region. In general, we can notice the uncertainty of political beliefs and distrust in political parties which is inherent in the majority of respondents.

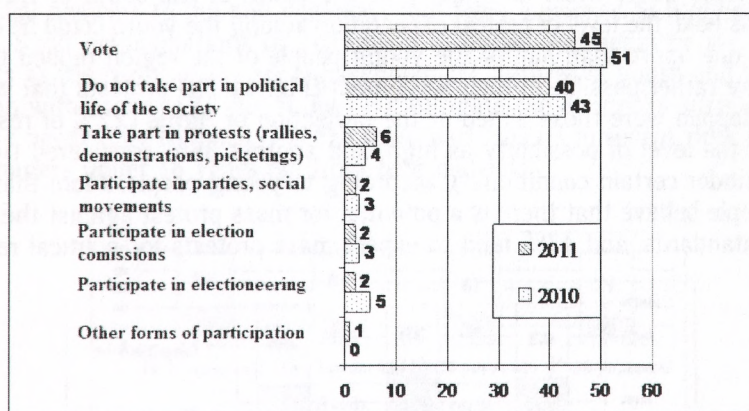


Fig. 1: forms of youth participation in political activities (in percentage of interviewees)

* As the empirical base of the article the monitoring study "Youth policy in the Tyumen region" that was undertaken in October of 2011 (Contract № 6/327-11 for the research work dated July 12, 2011) was used. The total number of subjects interviewed in the south of the Tyumen Region amounts to 1222 people aged from 14 to 30 years old. The selection is limited by sex, age and type of settlement (town or rural) quota. The selection bias equals 2.8% for one criterion.

Undoubtedly, young people are not a homogeneous group, and there are significant differences of social and political behavior in the context of socio-demographic, settlement and economic groups. Thus, with age and rising educational level, the interest in politics increases; women are more likely to participate in the public sphere, while men tend to become members of political parties and other social associations. Rural young people generally show less social and political activity. The most significant dispersion of the figure of interest in politics (from total inaction to active interest) is marked among the richest and the poorest. Nevertheless, youth involvement in socio-political life of the region is very weak.

Let us examine the dynamics of youth protest moods in the region. For the analysis of protest activity four indicators were used:

1) The level of expectation of protest (the question was worded as follows: What is the possibility of mass youth protests in your town, village or settlement?).

2) The level of potential readiness for open protests (Will you be taking part in protests if they happen?) — This question shows the actual representation of protest moods.

3) Preferable ways of protection of rights and interests (In what form are you ready to express your position towards painful problems?) — This question shows readiness to act.

4) The attitude towards extremist youth associations (What is your attitude towards actions of youth communities that tend to use force-oriented solutions to problems like inter-ethnic ones: skinheads, Russian National Unity, National Bolshevik Party, the Vanguard of Red Youth and so on?) — This question shows the level of radicalism of views and assessments.

In October 2011, when an enquiry of the youth of the south of the Tyumen Region was held, the level of protest expectation among the youth could be estimated as a high one: more than half of the young people of the region replied that mass protests are rather possible in their settlement (Fig. 4). The protests that were most likely to happen were those aimed at the protection of rights (22% of respondents estimated the level of possibility as high, and another 36% considered them to be possible “under certain conditions”), according to young people. More than 50% of young people believe that there is a potential for mass protest against the lowering of living standards, and 47% tend to expect mass protests for political reasons.

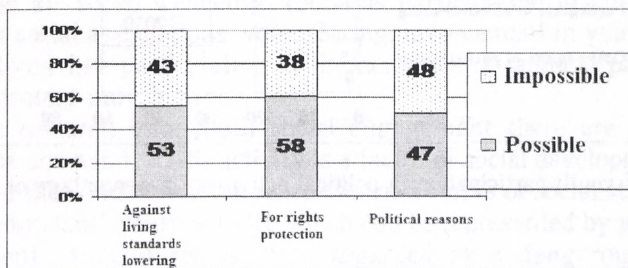


Fig. 2: “What is the possibility of mass youth protests in your town, village or settlement?”, in percentage of interviewees.

The data in Fig. 2 was arranged according to the following principle: the value “Possible” includes the answers “Very possible” and “Possible under certain conditions”; the value “Impossible” includes answers “Rather impossible” and “Impossible”

Young people's readiness to participate in these activities is lower, but still it is rather high. 34% of young people are ready to participate in mass protests (the sum of «yes, sure» and «most likely» answers).

This high level of readiness for protest behavior formed in 2011 not only among young people. A comparison with the survey of the total population's opinion held in May 2011 shows that this is the general attitude which is typical for the general population of the region.

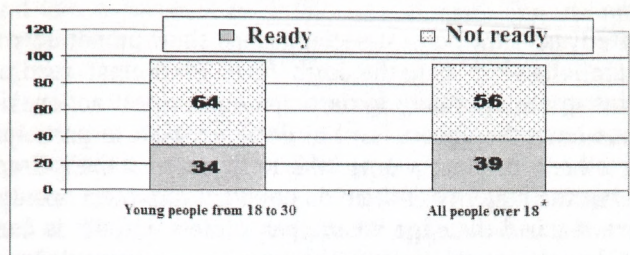


Fig. 3: Percentage of answers given to the question

“Will you be taking part in protests if they happen?” out of all interviewees

* The data is given in comparison with the results of a poll held among the people of the south of the Tyumen region in May 2011

The value “Ready” includes answers “Yes, sure” and “Most likely”. The value “Not ready” includes answers “No” and “Probably not”.

Teenagers and youngsters (14-22 years old) dominate among the people inclined towards protest (Fig. 4). The representatives of the youngest age group gave the most radical answers to the poll questions that were supposed to highlight protest potential. Such manifestations of extremism in minds and behavior are explained by experts as the result of the socio-psychological features of youth and teenagers' interaction with society [2]. But it does not mitigate the danger of such a frame of mind. One needs only to recall that the main participants in recent riots in the UK were teenagers under 18 years old from poor districts.

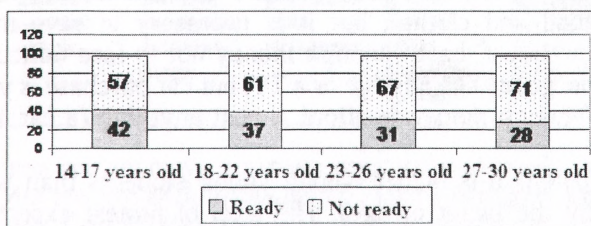


Fig. 4. The distribution of answers to the question “Will you be taking part in protests if they happen?”

* Age, in % of interviewed; given by age group

* “Research into the life quality and social health of the population of the Tyumen Region” (Government Contract № 56 6/212-11 dated of 04.08.2011). The selection of the south of the Tyumen Region includes 2335 people. The selection structure by sex, age and type of settlement coincides (with the bias up to 2%) with the structure of the adult (older than 18) population of the south of the Tyumen Region, the selection bias does not exceed 3%.

The highest level of protests expectancy is demonstrated by the economically extreme groups — “the poorest” and “the richest”. But the reasons of these “alike” answers are different: first ones are economically deprived, while second ones want to “protect” the level and the quality of life they already have; it may also be the reaction to the strong barriers that prevent entering the political elite. That is why the wealthiest categories of respondents are more likely to give positive answers on the questions of possibility of protest actions than the representatives of other social groups.

The representatives of the poorest social groups show up not only the high level of protest expectations, but also the high level of protest readiness (47% of respondents of this group are ready to participate in protest actions). “The richest” economical groups have the lowest level of declared wish to participate in protest activities among others, in other words “the rich” express their discontent by the current situation but the majority of them do not want to protest openly. The poorest, in their turn, have reached the edge when open protest activity is considered to be a rather acceptable solution to their problems. So, economical deprivation is an important factor that causes not only protest expectations, but also the wish of protest participation among the youth.

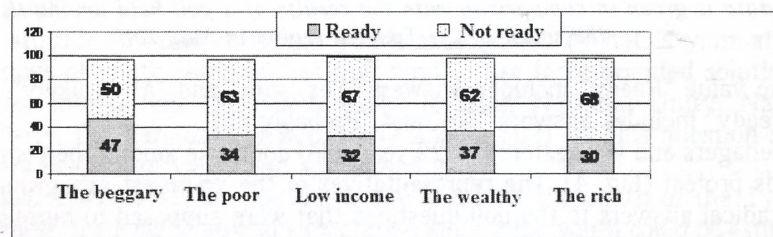


Fig. 5 “Will you be taking part in protests if they happen?”

**self-evaluation of financial standing, given in % of interviewed group*

“The beggary” have “not enough money even to buy food”; “the poor” have “enough money only to buy food and pay bills”; “low-income” subjects have “enough money to buy food and clothes, but it is necessary to save money for major purchases”; “the wealthy” have “enough money not to face difficulties buying the majority of durable goods like a fridge or a TV, but car purchase is yet unaffordable”; “the rich” have “enough money to afford almost anything (a car, a flat, a summer residence)”;

The protest potential is higher among young students than young employees (it is impacted by the factor of age). The level of protest expectation is highest among the students of higher education institutions. They also show maximum readiness for protest behavior.

Concerning the choice of ways and forms of defending rights and interests, the most popular answer is “Ready to sign a petition to the state and social structures” — 22%, and “Ready to express my position and raise the issue for discussion on the Internet” — 18%. Participation in protest activities (such as rallies, picketing, strikes) as a way to express opinion was chosen by 11% of respondents. Illegitimate forms of rights defense — “Defending a position by any means, even illegal” — were chosen by 7% of respondents.

And again, university students were the most active category of young people. They chose conventional and non-conventional means of solving their problems. Only 30% of students do not see the reason to publicly express their opinion (the lesser percentage of “low-profiles” exists only among “the beggary” — 26%). A considerable proportion of students are ready to participate in civil actions and picketing (16%), and a further 11% choose illegitimate ways of solving problems.

Young workers out of this variety of answers prefer to apply to state and social structures, and this trend rises with educational level. The exception is the social group of entrepreneurs, they prefer to solve their problems “by any, even illegal means” (the greatest number among the groups, 17%, while the average number is 7%), and they do not tend to solve their problems by participation in social actions (only 5% of them are ready to do so, while the average number among other groups is 11%) or signing petitions to state structures (15% vs. the average 22%).

Participation in protests and forms of defending rights chosen by respondents directly depend on their satisfaction with life in general and by such components as housing conditions and work. The respondents that are not satisfied with their lives, housing conditions and jobs are more ready to defend their rights and interests, and they are usually more intent on acting decisively. And it's quite the opposite for the people who are satisfied with life. They do not tend to choose active forms of protest, and they are inclined to defend their positions rather on Internet forums than through real actions (Fig. 6).

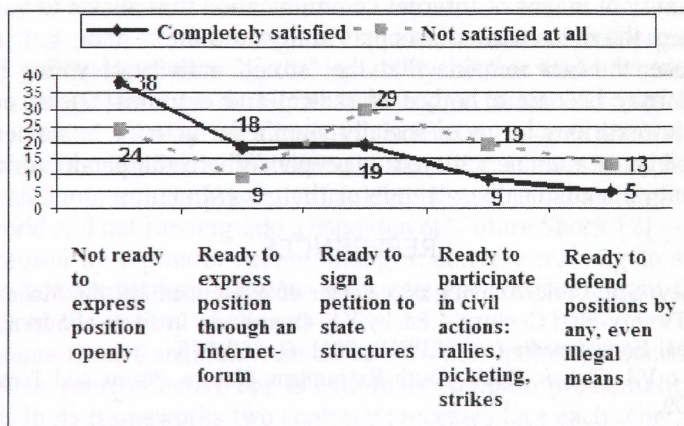


Fig. 6 “In what form you are ready to express your position towards painful problems?”

*“Are you presently satisfied with your life in general?”

The answers are “Completely satisfied” and “Not satisfied at all”, given in %

Summing up, favorable economic conditions such as housing, a job and decent income can to some extent limit the protests and “street” activity of people with low income. Relatively wealthy and rich people have other “limiters”, such as the opportunities for self-actualization, real opportunities to make a career in social or political spheres.

Youth relations with extremist youth groups with some level of conventionality (such as skinheads, Russian National Unity, National Bolshevik Party, the Vanguard of Red Youth and so on) can be considered as the expression of radicalism of views

and assessments. First of all, it is important to say that 20% of young people know nothing about these organizations' activities; 15% to some extent approve of their actions (such responses as "approve completely" and "rather approve"); 55% do not approve of their actions.

Teenagers and people of the young age group dominate among the representatives of extremist organizations; generally they are men, they have secondary or lower secondary education, they also may be school pupils or university students, and they may represent "the beggary" social group. These organizations may also have an approval of "the richest" young people. Negative evaluation of the existing conditions of a settlement that can interfere with the life plans of young people also increases sympathy for extremist youth organizations. The development of priority measures increasing self-actualization opportunities for young people in different types of settlements can be an effective method of preventing extremism.

To sum up, there is a specific situation in the region when, on the one hand, young people show social detachment, apathy, disbelief in social institutions. The level of youth involvement in socially approved forms of socio-political activity is very low. On the other hand, the young people of the region have a very high level of protest readiness, which was demonstrated by them after the recent parliamentary elections. Analysts give a number of causes of such activity in the younger generation — unfulfilled expectations of the middle class, absence of prospects, accumulated hatred of the lower classes, "response to the atmosphere of stagnation", increasing quality of means of Internet communication that allows to quickly spread ideas and gives the discontented an opportunity to unite.

In any case, the fact remains that the "street" activity of young people is on increasing. It may become a hotbed of radical and extremist ideas, or it may be transformed into various forms of socially significant activity implemented for the benefit of society as a whole and young people. Where the pendulum swings now to great extent depends on the attitude of the government.

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