



BOOK REVIEW IN THE SPECIAL SECTION

Maria V. Pevnaya (Ed.). (2023). *Sotsial'noe uchastie molodezhi v sotsiokul'turnom razvitii gorodov Rossii i postsovetskikh stran: Potentsial i model' upravleniia* [Social Participation of Youth in the Sociocultural Development of Russian Cities and Post-Soviet Countries: Potential and Management Model]. Izdatel'stvo Ural'skogo universiteta

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In this review of the book *Sotsial'noe uchastie molodezhi v sotsiokul'turnom razvitii gorodov Rossii i postsovetskikh stran: Potentsial i model' upravleniia* [Social Participation of Youth in the Sociocultural Development of Russian Cities and Post-Soviet Countries: Potential and Management Model]¹, I highlight its unique strengths and initiate a discussion on topics that are too vast to be comprehensively covered within the confines of a single, albeit inclusive, book.

The book aims to explore a multitude of issues related to the social participation of youth in the contemporary context. The authors are renowned scientists from Ural Federal University (Russia), including M. V. Pevnaya, E. A. Shuklina, A. N. Tarasova, A. V. Kulminskaia, T. Y. Bystrova, M. S. Fedorova, D. V. Minchenko, D. F. Telepaeva, S. N. Kostina, O. V. Notman, M. Cernicova-Buca, whose research and publications have had a significant impact on the academic and scientific community not only in Russia, but also worldwide (Bystrova et al., 2022; Pevnaya & Telepaeva, 2020).

Along with the research findings themselves, what I find particularly intriguing about this work is the successful fusion of research strategies and

¹ For the full version of the book in Russian, please visit: <https://elar.ufrfu.ru/handle/10995/122737?locale=en>

methods. The research methodology developed and implemented by the authors of this book provides practical insights that can prove invaluable for other research projects dealing with complex issues.

The book is structured into Introduction, Chapters 1–5, Conclusion, and Appendices. The first chapter delves into conceptual approaches and models for social management and policies aimed at enhancing the involvement of young people in the life of their urban environments. This chapter stimulates a captivating discussion about the role of youth as either objects or subjects of social policies, including those in Russia, as framed within various concepts of social participation.

In my perspective, the book primarily aligns with a prevailing trend in youth studies, treating youth as a valuable resource for urban development. It views youth more as an object than as a subject of public policies aimed at their inclusion in urban development projects. The central question posed by the authors, “How to involve the resource of youth in territorial development” (p. 266, Trans. by Arthur Atanesyan—A. A.) encapsulates the book’s core focus. This approach, which sees youth as a resource, is as crucial as the one that place young people at the center of policy-making process. Both approaches are equally important. In the latter scenario, youth actively engage with public policies, including those related to urban development, considering them as resources for self-development and self-representation. When combined with other research works that explore both perspectives, this book serves as a valuable roadmap for shaping public policies targeting youth. It is particularly pertinent in societies where traditions of initiating policy reforms from various societal strata, including youth (a bottom-to-top approach), are still evolving.

The book exemplifies a complex and multi-layered analysis drawing on a variety of social research methods. The comprehensive and interdisciplinary research conducted by the authors unfolds in three stages, elaborated in Chapters 2–5. The book’s structure reflects the inclusion of two primary research components: one executed through local fieldwork in Yekaterinburg, Russia, and the other through international investigations encompassing two post-Soviet countries (Russia and Armenia) and two Eastern European nations (Poland and Romania). These four countries are represented in the field research by cities which the authors have found comparable by their cultural and educational roles, as well as by their size similarly proportional to population of their countries: Yekaterinburg (Russian Federation), Gyumri (Armenia), Poznań and Zielona Góra (Poland), and Timișoara (Romania).

These major regional cities serve as university hubs, attracting young individuals from the surrounding areas. The authors employ a comparative approach grounded in the assumption that young people in post-Soviet and post-socialist countries may exhibit both similarities and differences in terms of motivations for social involvement and participation. Consequently, exploring these commonalities and disparities serves to shed light on specific mechanisms governing public behavior among young individuals in the present day.

During the initial phase of the study, 1,276 young respondents aged between 14 and 35 were interviewed. This sample comprised 465 young individuals from Yekaterinburg, Russia, 268 from Gyumri, Armenia, 264 from two cities in Poland, and

279 from Timișoara, Romania. The broader sample consisted of students hailing from 41 settlements in the Sverdlovsk region of Russia, 43 in Armenia, 110 in Poland, and 94 cities and rural areas in Romania (pp. 54–55).

This study focuses on determining the level of awareness of the younger generation about the history and culture of their hometown, identifying the views of young citizens on significant urban symbols, public spaces, cultural and historical sites of value to the urban community and tourists, assessing the experience of social participation of young people, and identifying various forms of direct and/or indirect participation of young people in the life of society. The study also explores a wide spectrum of social practices among young individuals, ranging from information sharing to volunteering within the context of their hometowns.

The authors distinguish passive and active forms of social participation. Passive forms involve activities such as signing petitions to protect historical monuments or the environment, while active forms encompass actions like park clean-ups, tree planting, assisting in the organization of exhibitions and public events, financial contributions to religious organizations, volunteering, online promotion of local attractions and cultural sites, and guiding tourists to key landmarks (p. 56).

In this context, an opening is provided for further discussion on at least two issues. Firstly, are there additional forms of social participation that hold greater importance, depending on specific national, cultural, and historical contexts? For instance, while donating to religious organizations is listed among the significant forms of social participation in this study, today, contributing to clinics for cancer patients, especially children, might be considered more crucial. During periods of armed conflicts, which have been a part of the social reality for multiple generations in and around Europe, including Poland, Romania, Russia, and Armenia, activities such as collecting clothing, food, and funds for refugees, veterans, and homeless people might take precedence, mobilizing young people and others. In such circumstances, running a tour of the city for tourists as shortlisted in this study may seem trivial. Presently, we also witness a growing trend of feeding street animals in city environments, for example, in Armenia and Russia. Therefore, evaluating youth's social involvement through the most contemporary and pertinent forms of participation, as validated by this particular demographic, appears to be a promising perspective.

Secondly, do some of the modern and popular forms of social participation challenge traditional descriptions of “active” and “passive” participation? For example, there is an ongoing and lively interdisciplinary debate today surrounding “slacktivism” as a form of online public activism. This concept is viewed differently by two main opposing camps of scholars: some consider it an active form of communicative engagement with intrinsic value, while others see it as passive and subservient, characterized by “lazy talking” and subordinate to “real” offline activism (Atanesyan, 2019; Basheva, 2020; Housley et al., 2018). The book paves the way for a broader discussion of these questions.

The second study included in the book focuses on a survey of youth in the Sverdlovsk region of Russia, conducted in 2020 using a standardized questionnaire. The authors aimed to uncover the motivational factors and practices of social

participation among the region's youth, with a focus on contributing to the socio-cultural development of the cities where these young respondents reside. The sampling was designed to include quotas based on gender, age, employment status, education, and level of involvement in public associations and organizations among young people.

This study sheds light on the most typical and relevant innovative social participation practices among youth in the cities of the Middle Ural region. Additionally, the study evaluates the level of information competence among schoolchildren and students concerning events crucial for regional development. The study delves into the potential of youth volunteering in sporting and cultural events and examines the influence of information sources (education and media) on youth motivation. Furthermore, the research tracks the evolution of volunteer activities, both in online and offline formats, and assesses potential prospects for their future development. Lastly, the authors implement an empirical typology to identify successful models for organizing effective management of young people's social participation, based on assessments provided by schoolchildren and students (pp. 59–60).

The third significant facet of the field research employed in this book utilized a case study approach. In this context, the city was regarded as a focal point for constructive social practices involving youth participation in the socio-cultural development of urban and administrative environments. Three cities were examined in total: Yekaterinburg (Russia), Gyumri (Armenia), and Timișoara (Romania). The study's objective was to discern the conditions, prerequisites, and influential factors affecting the social participation of urban youth in post-socialist countries. The ultimate aim was to formulate management models and specify the techniques for overseeing constructive forms of youth involvement in diverse formats. Researchers analyzed and described socio-cultural urban projects featuring youth participation as illustrative cases. These projects were supervised at various levels, including municipal and those with international involvement. The purpose was to identify the current projects and strategies employed by key stakeholders in managing urban youth.

One might develop the impression that the authors primarily view youth as the target of social policies, designed to activate, stimulate, support, and encourage young individuals:

The social participation of youth in modern Russia is supported at the state level. Within the framework of the national project *Obrazovanie* [Education], various programs and projects are being implemented throughout the country. However, in many respects their effectiveness for the country, the region, and most importantly for the young citizens themselves depends on how exactly and what exactly officials, specialists from educational institutions and youth policy do in partnership with youth. (p. 266; Trans. by A. A.)

This illustrates the top-down approach, making it even more imperative to consider a more critical examination of this approach in subsequent discussions, exploring alternative bottom-up approaches and resources that can provide valuable insights.

Drawing from the results of the first phase of the case study, a comprehensive set of contemporary concepts for the socio-cultural development of the city with youth involvement emerged. This set was further elaborated through interviews with experts, including representatives from municipal government, the non-profit sector, and organizers of youth projects in cultural and educational urban institutions.

The case study strategy encompassed focus group interviews with students and young volunteers, participant observation of individuals and entities orchestrating youth participation across universities, non-governmental organizations, and the broader socio-cultural landscape of the city. Together, these methods facilitated the classification of current ideas and directions for the socio-cultural development of cities, allowing for the characterization of their unique qualities and specifics as cultural and educational cities. These methods also created a framework for social participation and self-realization among youth. In addition, the research team collected photographic and video materials, which provide visual insights into the practices of social participation in the analyzed cities. The study gathered data on urban symbols of significance from the perspective of young people.

To delve into the matter of constructing the symbolic urban space by young individuals, the authors combined focus group interviews with the mental mapping technique. Again, the research locations encompassed two focus groups in Gyumri (Armenia), three focus groups in Yekaterinburg (Russia), and two focus groups in Timișoara (Romania). The study addressed a range of issues related to the exploration of the city's associative image, employing various methods including the association method, the mental map method to investigate students' perceptions of the city as a platform for personal self-realization (a "city for themselves"), and the symbolic space of the city as an integrator of youth social participation.

There were identified and thoroughly analyzed nine projects based on participant observations, expert interviews with managers and personnel from nonprofit organizations, educational, social, and cultural institutions engaged with young volunteers, focus groups, group and individual interviews with students experienced in active social participation, document analysis, as well as information resources (websites and social media groups) pertaining to the specified cities. These projects were frequently cited by experts, specialists, and students. A qualitative analysis was carried out on the collected and transcribed materials, treating these projects as distinct and independent cases for in-depth examination.

The conceptualization of urban space through the visualization of young people's ideas and perceptions is particularly intriguing. Drawing from their extensive study, the authors have identified several key concepts of urban spaces enriched by the involvement of youth, including "City as a Home" (found in Gyumri, Yekaterinburg, and Timișoara), "Free City" (in Yekaterinburg and Timișoara), "City as a Center, and Center as a City" (in Yekaterinburg and Timișoara), "Educational Center" (in Yekaterinburg, Timișoara, and Gyumri), and "Combination of Traditions and Innovations" (in Gyumri and Timișoara) (pp. 131–149; Trans. by A. A.).

Through expert interviews, participant observations, and focus group discussions, four types of young people have been emphasized: activists, conformists, potential

participants, and passive individuals. After measuring young people's commitment to participate in the developing of their cities through their perception of the city as attractive and their willingness to promote it through offline and online activism, the authors found that among Armenian (40%) and Romanian (39%) youth, the activist type (those with high levels of both criteria) prevails, compared to Poland (21%) and Russia (16%).

Potential activists, i.e., those who highly value their city but are not very motivated to promote it, are more numerous in Poland (45%) and Russia (43%). All four countries (cities) under study have almost the same percentage of conformists, i.e., those who are ready to promote their cities, but do not rate them highly. However, indifferent/passive young people, who do not rate their city highly and are not interested in promoting it, prevail in Russia (21%), ahead of Poland (16%) and Romania (13%). Interestingly, this passive type of youth, who do not like their city and are not interested in participating in its development, seems to be sparsely represented in Armenia (3 %) (pp. 200–201).

The collection of qualitative data aimed at complementing and refining the results of the quantitative survey, specifically pertaining to young citizens' perceptions of crucial urban symbols, public spaces, and cultural and historical landmarks that hold particular value for both the urban community and tourists. A comparative analysis of the practices of public management of urban youth activities at both the city level and within individual organizations across different countries, as well as identification and description of promising urban sociocultural projects that involve youth participation, help to better frame youth studies as well as future projects with/for social participation of youth.

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