



## EDITORIAL

# Social Participation as a Theoretical Concept and Social Phenomenon

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### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This work is supported by grant of the Russian Science Foundation, project No. 24-28-01482 “Project-based learning in the development of professionalism and citizenship of Russian students: management context and creation of transforming agency”, <https://rscf.ru/project/24-28-01482/>

As well as serving as a theoretical framework for considering topics in sociology, psychology, anthropology, and economics, the concept of social participation informs interdisciplinary studies. Whether at the level of local spaces or different countries, the various interaction practices of different social groups occurring in the context of contemporary changes in the globalized world can be captured according to this theoretical paradigm. While there are a number of concepts and definitions of social participation, we rely here on its broad interpretation as human interaction with other people in the course of their joint actions based around certain goals. According to this version, social participation can be associated with various processes to help explain how the interaction of people in communities leads to certain results. The diversity of approaches in the study of this phenomenon can be reduced to its definition as the participation of human actors to meet almost any conceivable collective aspiration (Cornwall, 2008). On the one hand, such a broad research optics is not always conducive to developing a common language for researchers working in different fields, leading to problems in the development and selection of tools for measuring social participation, as well as blurred or incomplete efforts in the field of social policy (Levasseur et al., 2010). On the other hand, the indicated basis of social participation provides a flexible theoretical framework for empirical studies into different practices of participation in order to assess their

Received 27 February 2024

Accepted 20 March 2024

Published online 5 April 2024

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structure and action, changes occurring at the level of personality and society, as well as the subjectivity of participants and organizers of participation in the increasingly complex context of everyday life.

The concept of participation is in many ways a central concern of sociology and social science. Social participation describes how a person participates in the activities of formal and informal groups, including clubs and voluntary societies, arts and sports, congregational activity, outdoor and productive activity, hobbies, study, and general cultural interests (Parker, 1983). In political sciences, the considered phenomenon is often labeled as public participation, narrowed to civil (citizen) or political participation in a citizen group or in other local political voluntary action, whether group or individual, conventional or deviant (Smith et al., 2017, p. 41). Such participation either takes place outwith or at the boundaries of the private and economic relations spheres (Nikovskaya & Skalaban, 2017).

What unites many the approaches and concepts of participation beyond disciplinary boundaries? Firstly, this may be considered in terms of the potential for changes that may occur in society as a result of social participation, which are generally viewed in terms of the behavior and quality of life of diverse social groups, along with the individuals that constitute them. All group initiatives that aim to solve different social problems also lead to changes in the actors themselves and other people, including wider society (Barnes et al., 2003). In some cases, social participation can influence improvements to the mental health, general well-being, and life satisfaction of participants, improving social competencies and thus resulting in the social integration of individuals (Schormans, 2014). In other cases, changes may occur in the structure of the provision of services to different population groups in terms of their effectiveness; here, improvements in management and organization are reflected in decisions made to improve the living conditions of residents. In terms of public administration, the purpose and result of citizen participation can include the solution of socio-economic issues through the adoption of laws, the formation of local agendas, settlement planning, regional and economic development, as well as reconciling the conflicting interests of social groups. While such changes may indeed be brought about, they are often ambiguous in their consequences. For example, they may not be fully implemented due to organizational actors' deliberate co-optation of citizens in order to advance their own positions (Hodge, 2005). Otherwise, in terms of the interaction between the authorities and NGOs, changes may not occur due to the reluctance of officials to interact with social activists (Arkipova, 2023).

Secondly, research into the different manifestations of social participation has incorporated theoretical ideas about the social capital of individuals or communities. Of course, theories of social capital and social participation overlap. Indeed, social participation is one of the integral components of social capital (Guillen et al., 2011). Social participation involves the formation of social trust and cooperation as key elements of civil society (Dekker & Uslaner, 2003). A number of studies demonstrate that changing patterns of social participation are determinative of the accumulation of social capital. In economic terms, social participation increases productivity in the private sector, just as social interaction in the market can itself be a source of social

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capital (Antoci et al., 2007). However, there is little doubt about the growing success of initiatives that involve social participation, which takes into account the human dimensions of development, with values, norms, culture, motivation, and solidarity among others (Uphoff, 2000).

Thirdly, social participation in all its manifestations is invariably localized. Thus, it manifests itself as practices of citizen activity in a certain territory (country, region, city, neighborhood, etc.), in a separate sphere (culture, provision of social services, sports, education, health, science, etc.), or a particular organization. As a result, social participation enters the public sphere, where collaborative interactions can intensify public discussion on possible solutions across the range of problems, at which they are aimed. At the same time, the localization of participation is also a determinant of the culture of participation in different communities. This culture influences prosocial behavior, the nature of social interactions between community members, and their involvement in various social participation practices (Khvorostianov & Remennick, 2018).

Fourthly, all manifestations of social participation are underpinned by the organizational principle. Even in the case of the self-organization of citizens, someone in the community invariably finds themselves in a leadership role. Such leaders set and coordinate with others the rules of interaction, indicating the goals and results of social participation and representing the interests of self-organizing communities in interaction with other communities, stakeholders, and power brokers. According to Russian scholarly tradition, social participation is considered as a controlled process of social communication in order to organize joint activities of citizens and population groups with the proper authorities or to provide communicative feedback control (Bogdanov & Merzlykov, 2018). The development of social participation as a process of interaction often leads to the formalization of emerging relationships between people in so-formed communities. Under these conditions, an important role is played by the organizational base of civic non-governmental organizations (NGOs), which are vital mechanisms for self-organization, as well as providing for the involvement of other people and representation of interests of different groups. In terms of civil society, the forms of social participation produced by non-profit organizations include the empowerment of vulnerable and excluded groups to strengthen their effective control over decisions that affect their health and quality of life, as well as increasing their access to health services (Della Queva, 2017).

One of the most verifiable forms of social participation in areas associated with helping behavior is volunteering. Numerous studies of volunteers and their work recognize an increase in the variety of types of volunteer participation in society. According to the Charities Aid Foundation, there is a general increase in the number of volunteers working across diverse countries and societies. In 2020, 55% of residents of different countries over the age of 15 participated in activities that helped strangers, while 19% of citizens worked as volunteers in non-profit organizations. Based on the World Giving Index, 62% of citizens or three billion people helped other people for free in 2022, while 23% worked as volunteers (Charities Aid Foundation, 2022).

Changes in prosocial behavior, involving different forms and types of social activity that include their horizontal and vertical interaction, drive the quest for new

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ways to conceptualize social participation, including the development of unique strategies for studying the different participation practices that make up the repertoires of the various social groups. Thus, the present issue demonstrates the possibility of combining various theories of social participation in modern studies along with the different approaches to its study. The theoretical framework of the presented research varies from the conceptualization of social participation as a broad scientific category to the definition of highly specific practices of volunteer activity or civic participation. The content and structure of the current issue questions are determined by the questions posed by the authors. It includes articles focusing on social activity of different age groups residing in various countries and regions, features of horizontal interaction in the civil sphere, social participation as a form of vertical interaction between citizens and officials, and the case of social participation as volunteering in the scientific sphere.

In the ARTICLE *Factors Influencing Social Participation of Older People in Russia: Study of Practices of Delayed Ageing*, Irina A. Grigoryeva, Oksana A. Parfenova, and Lyudmila A. Vidiyasova highlight factors that influence the extent, to which older people engage in social participation seen in terms of their social activity in the broadest sense. The study presented in the article is based on a conceptualization of the social participation of the seniors as the preservation of social statuses and roles of independent individuals participating in the life of society. The trajectory of the study is built according to the logic of extending adulthood or development of “active ageing.” With the acknowledgment of the socially-determined nature of aging, the authors analyze the changes in the social activity of older people in the context of digitalization and during the post-pandemic period. The researchers found that the involvement of older people in various forms of social participation and inclusion depends on their age, financial situation, and marital status. Based on the research results, the social activity of the older people is shown not to be fundamentally limited by their state of health; moreover, the use of the Internet and other activities contribute to a positive perception on the part of respondents in terms of their age-related status. Following the logic of active aging, such factors contribute to the psychological well-being of older people by supporting their role behavior, including their involvement in various forms of social participation. The study revealed the age threshold at which the restructuring of the social participation of the older people generally takes place. At the age of 75, there is a transformation of social participation from an external social interaction to a more local form that is structured around family. The authors’ conclusions are based on the results of a quantitative survey of 210 older people aged 60 and over that includes an analysis of their medical documents. These data are supplemented by the materials of 50 in-depth semi-structured interviews with informants from the studied age cohort.

The ARTICLE “*You are Needed and You Exist*”: *Motivation for Social Participation of Older Activists, Rostov Oblast, Russia* by Tatyana S. Kienko expands the theory of social participation of older people. Here, the sociological meaning of social participation is interpreted in its broadest sense. This describes the participation of older people in a wide range of practices of sharing of individual, group, and community resources in the course of various activities, including public and non-public, formal and informal.

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The article identifies the social participation characteristics of older activists and leaders. In accordance with the grounded theory, the author identifies and describes factors contributing to the sustainability of active social participation, determining the change in human role behavior from non-participation or sporadic involvement to constant activity with a certain motivation. The latter describes the involvement of older Russians in socially significant activities. The qualitative study shows that the basis for the motivation of older leaders and activists consists in the moral duty, value, necessity, and vocation of their involvement in socially significant activities. This is generally the result of life experience, the professional one in particular. The active social participation of the older people becomes their resource for improving the quality of life and maintaining vitality through making rewarding efforts that recognizes their competence. The orientation of older leaders towards integration with like-minded people opens up new opportunities for their self-realization in communities, delaying aging and maintaining active longevity. The article analyses 18 semi-structured interviews by senior social activists aged 65 to 90 from the Rostov Oblast, which were carried out in 2021.

In the ARTICLE *Impact of Citizen Participation on Solving the Social Problems of Small Regional Towns in Russia*, Yulia V. Ukhanova, Ekaterina D. Kopytova, and Sergei G. Zhestyannikov focus on the issue of the social participation of citizens as residents of a specific country, region, or city. Here, civic participation is considered as a resource for the development of a region and its population, confirming the logic of the theory and conclusions of Robert Putnam. The researchers state that boosting the development of small towns largely depends on the participation of local communities in regional development, as well as on the state policy of the country and regions. The civic activity of the population intensively contributes to the development of regional identity. According to the results of sociological research carried out in small towns of the Vologda Oblast in Russia, the level of activity of citizens has been growing significantly in recent years. As well as taking a charitable form, this activity has the character of constructive forms of interaction with official representatives, thus representing a dialogue between society and the state. Such a process leads to relations between the population and the authorities that increasingly take the form of a partnership. In their reliance on empirical research data, the authors make the convincing case that the population acquires the attributes of agency in social development through various civic participation practices. In small towns, social networks represent a particularly valuable resource for expanding civic engagement, since it is by this means that citizens create communities to form an agenda for the discussion of local problems. Such communities are characterized by their increased rates of participation. Self-organization in small towns is better seen in terms of social participation practices that are aimed at joint solving the problems of landscaping and providing charitable assistance. One of the most interesting conclusions of the authors touches upon the changes that occur due to civic participation actions. Through their interactions with the authorities, some individuals, groups, organizations, and communities gain publicity, allowing them to shape public opinion and thus determine changes in their groups and organizations in the local community as a whole. The

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authors' conclusions were obtained on the basis of the questionnaire survey of the population in the region ( $N = 1900$ ) and supplemented with focus-group interviews with 47 experts from government, business, "third sector," media, and science. The study was conducted by the authors in the Vologda Oblast in 2023.

The ARTICLE *Subjective Well-Being and Participation in Volunteering in Russia* by Irina V. Mersianova, Natalya V. Ivanova, and Aleksandra S. Briukhno aims to provide insights into the nature of the relationship between volunteering (representing one of the better-studied forms of social participation) and the subjective well-being of volunteers. The authors describe the relationship between volunteering as a prosocial activity and the subjective well-being of volunteers in terms of psychological and health-related effects experienced by people as a result of their social participation. The authors analyze the causal relationship between social capital and the social well-being of Russians who give their time without payment, i.e., voluntarily, to activities carried out either through an organization or directly for the benefit of other people outside their family or household. The empirical research of sociologists is based on the provisions of "warm glow" giving theory and the concept of social capital. The analysis shows that financially secure and healthy people living with a family really feel happier. The feeling of happiness is also associated with the confidence of Russians in their immediate environment, as well as their perception of social cohesion. The authors argue that helping behavior and volunteering have an "external effect" meaning that people feel happier if they observe social solidarity. The research findings are based on data from an All-Russian survey conducted by the Centre for Studies of Civil Society and the Nonprofit Sector (HSE University, Moscow, Russia) in September 2022. Telephone interviews were conducted with 2,015 respondents, including urban and rural citizens aged 18 and older.

In the ARTICLE *From Informal to Formal: Features of Volunteering in Arab Countries*, Viacheslav A. Ivanov and El Sayed El Eryan focus on the potential of Arab volunteers in solving social problems. The authors explore the activity of volunteers as a form of helping behavior, a type of social participation that relies on the initiative of the volunteers themselves to empower citizens at the same time as benefiting society. The possibility of engaging in unpaid work in a formal organization or on an individual basis in different countries is realized within the informal networks of their immediate environment. However, organized volunteering is stronger in some countries than others. In other cases, informal interaction and mutual assistance predominate. The study presented in this article discusses the changes in the institutional conditions for volunteering in the countries of the Arab region. The transforming relationship between volunteers and other members of society is understood in terms of the identification by volunteers of the social impact of their activity and work on communities, which in turn is largely determined by the development of non-profit organizations in these countries, representing an infrastructure for volunteer activity. The recognition of volunteering by the governments of the countries of the Arab region, as well as state support for non-profit organizations and the activity of volunteers, has led to the expansion of formal volunteering in those countries where centuries-old traditions of mutual assistance to others based on religious and humanitarian values were already strong. According

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to the results of an online survey of 768 volunteers aged 18 years and older from 20 countries of the Arab world carried out in 2023, there is convincing evidence of an increase in trust in people in the countries of this region due to volunteer participation and citizen involvement in non-profit organizations. Citizens with volunteer experience in an organized format appreciate the social significance for society of this type of social participation of citizens in their communities.

The ARTICLE *Youth Participation in Citizen Science: Problems and Opportunities of Engagement in Russian Context* by Gulnara F. Romashkina, Elena V. Andrianova, and Marina V. Khudyakova draw the reader's attention to the volunteering in the scientific field, a relatively new social participation practice in modern Russia, which represents a horizontal form of public participation in progressivist action. The authors study scientific volunteering, one of the unique manifestations of social participation, as a collective action aimed at the common good through the involvement of volunteers in solving scientific problems. Such manifestations are defined in the research as "citizen science", representing a horizontal form of public participation that encourages people to work for the benefit of scientific progress. Based on the data of 11 in-depth interviews with the organizers of citizen science and a formalized survey of 530 scientific volunteers aged 18–35, the authors analyze the motives for participation and types of volunteer activities in citizen science, as well as organizational schemes for involving scientific volunteers. It is shown that the involvement of scientific volunteers in scientific projects constitutes a purposeful organized process. Youth participation in citizen science is significantly increased by the personal interest of young people in science, as well as their experience of volunteering. This interest turns out to be especially pronounced among high school students. The motivation of scientific volunteers is focused on the achievement of some significant results in the future through their participation in citizen science and in the volunteer movement as a whole. The study reveals not only an expansion in social interaction as a result of the activity of scientific volunteers, but also a change in the configuration of science itself at institutional and epistemological levels. Due to the activities of scientific volunteering, horizontal ties between young people and scientists are expanding, along with increased confidence in science and volunteering.

In the ARTICLE *Experiences in "Letting the Public in": Tentative Conclusions on the Administration-Public Tango for Co-Responsible Local Governance* Mariana Cernicova-Buca investigates the approach of "co-creation." On the basis of this theory, social participation is revealed to consist in the participation of citizens in the management of their own communities. Within this theoretical framework, it is possible to consider social participation as an interactive process that penetrates into all spheres of public life. The production of public value is achieved through the cooperation of local public administration and citizens in the course of constructive exchange of knowledge, resources, competencies, and ideas. In her research, the author applies a participatory methodology for studying the case, analyzing the context of civil participation of the population in the management of various projects taking place in Timișoara, the largest city in the western part of Romania. The article shows how EU standards were integrated into the formation of an appropriate regional management policy in a country with

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a communist background. In the past twenty years, the concept of “co-responsibility” in public administration scenarios has been implemented along with the allocation of resources and engagement of public and academic organizations. The author identifies and then analyzes some difficulties in expanding the participation of citizens in governance due to limited civic competences and awareness of such opportunities. While considering the difficulties inherent in the expansion of citizen participation, the author warns that the trust of the community can easily be lost due to a failure to apply the practice of co-creation in decision-making and generating feedback. Due to the limited influence on decision-making officials, public fatigue and frustration arise regardless of the format of co-creation: advisory councils, group consultations, local coordination groups, participatory budgets. The author emphasizes the role of political actors in the organization of citizen participation, which, in determining the policy of accepting or not accepting the context of constant interaction with citizens, brings harm or benefit to the involvement of different groups of the population in addressing various problems. The research data reflected in the article were collected according to the participant observation method during the author’s monitoring or steering of citizen participation processes and/or participation as a member of target groups in processes curated by administrative bodies since 1990.

The BOOK REVIEW section includes a review by Arthur V. Atanesyan of M. V. Pevnaya (Ed.), *Sotsial’noe Uchastie Molodezhi v Sotsiokul’turnom Razvitií 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], 2023. In the book under review, Ural sociologists explore a multitude of issues related to the social participation of youth in the contemporary context.

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