

SOCIAL ACTIVITY OF THE SUBJECTIVE MIDDLE CLASS OF THE RUSSIAN REGION: RESULTS OF QUALITATIVE SOCIOLOGICAL RESEARCH

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Abstract. *The article presents the results of a study of the middle class of the Russian region in terms of the manifestation of various types of social activity by actors. The emphasis on the analysis of social activity is motivated by the consideration of this attribute as a criterion for the allocation of the middle class in the post-industrial period. The research method – an in-depth focused interview through which two tasks are solved: identifying the degree of significance for informants of social activity and examples of its manifestation; determination of the degree of readiness to participate in the implementation of the innovation development strategy of the Tomsk Region and thereby act as a “driver” of social changes. Representatives of the middle class are included in the sample based on self-identification. It was revealed that the middle class of the Russian region is active in realising personal, but not social goals. Such a characteristic of the post-industrial middle class as the willingness to act as a driver of social development is not observed. Based on the results of the study, options are proposed for solving this problem related to the mechanisms of involving the middle class in regional planning and decision-making regarding generally significant issues.*

Keywords: *self-identification, social activity, sociological research, qualitative methods.*

I. Introduction

The middle class of post-industrial society is characterised in science by various features that distinguish it from a given social stratum in the industrial period. One of the key differences is an active life position, a willingness to assert one's rights (Safiullin *et al.*, 2012) and lead others to modernise society (Volkov, 2012). Researchers note that, having reached the desired level of personal well-being, a modern actor feels the need to solve wider social problems (Inglehart, 1990), is willing to realise common interests in a wider social field (Shatkin, 2010), is a “distributor” of new social economic and sociocultural practices (Vlasova, 2010), a driver of social change.

It is the social behaviour of the middle class that is emphasised in studies conducted in different countries: class representatives defend their interests in the development of public policy, demand a more equitable distribution of income (Unger, 2006), advocate for a clean environment (in the source – clean environment) (Kharas and Gertz, 2016) are active in their community of residence (Villegas Celso, 2010). In addition, such subjects are capable of social self-description

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(Barbehön and Geugjes, 2019). The self-reference of a modern actor has led to the fact that self-identification with the middle class has become one of the leading criteria for stratification (Ilyinykh, 2017), since it is the actor's attitudes that motivate models of his economic and social behaviour. If a person feels himself to be a representative of the middle class, is ready for self-realisation based on his own strength, then this will be reflected in his actions.

The relevance of the study is motivated by the fact that it is impossible to achieve serious success in the socio-economic development of the regions without the participation of the middle class as the most active part of the population. Many regions of Russia have adopted development strategies until 2030, and the corresponding manifestation of activity that contributes to the achievement of strategic goals by the middle class is currently timely.

The novelty of the study is due to the fact that even in the second decade of the 21st century, approaches to disentangling the middle class of Russia in a significant part of scientific work are based primarily on the material criteria inherent in the industrial era (Vlasova, 2010; Alekseenok, 2014; Khayrullina, 2012, and other); in studies of the Russian middle class, its social activity is practically not considered.

The aim of this study is to identify the degree and forms of manifestation of social activity of representatives of the subjective middle class in the regions of Russia using the example of the Tomsk region.

II. Materials and methods

The research method is an in-depth focused interview (Minichiello *et al.*, 2008). This choice is based on a general methodological shift in modern sociology towards qualitative approaches. Within the framework of an in-depth focused interview, it becomes possible to thematically cover all key topics for research while maintaining freedom of variation depending on individual biographical trajectories of informants. This method has proven to be informative in studies of the middle class, in particular women entrepreneurs (Martynova and Sazonova, 2018).

The interview guide contained two problem-thematic blocks:

1. Identifying of the degree of significance for informants of social activity and examples of its manifestation. Some questions of the block: *Give examples of your social activity. Give examples of your participation in making socially significant decisions. Why are you participating or not participating in such activities? Do you consider it important for a modern person to be socially active? How active are you in achieving your life goals? How important is it for you to realise that work brings benefits to others, to society? In what types of activities do you strive to show your abilities?*

2. Determining the degree of willingness to participate in the implementation of the innovation development strategy of the Tomsk Region and thereby act as a "driver" of social change. Some questions of the block: *Do you feel yourself a resident of an innovation region? Why? Do you support the development goals of the Tomsk region and why?* At the same time, the interviewer demonstrated and further discussed in detail with the informant a list of strategic goals.

The final sample included cases of seven informants (three men, four women living in the largest cities of Tomsk Oblast – Tomsk and Seversk), who uniquely identified themselves with the middle class and met the quota principle in terms of a sufficient number of sociodemographic parameters. These parameters include age, gender, social status, inclusion in the types of professional activity attributed by modern social theorists to the typical employment of the middle class (managers and engineers of large enterprises, entrepreneurs, employees of the scientific and educational complex (Pishnyak, 2017; Lipasova, 2016)). The study was conducted in 2018.

The methodology underlying the preparation, processing and analysis of interviews is described in the works of sociologists working in line with the qualitative paradigm (Semenova, 1998; Ilyin, 2006; Steinberg, 2014). Interviews were subject to audio recordings, after which they were transcribed using a denatured technique (Bucholtz, 2007), which

implies following the rules of the Russian language and speech. In the process of analysis, meaningfully close answers and judgments of informants were combined into clusters, each of which was accompanied by a primary hypothesis regarding the probabilistic interpretation of the data obtained. In the “Results and Discussion” section, a comprehensive analysis of aggregated data is proposed.

III. Results and discussion

A comparison of informants’ statements on the topic of whether they consider it important for a modern person to be socially active, as well as how they evaluate their own social activity, revealed a mismatch between the informants’ values and their real behaviour: *“I do not consider myself socially active. But I think that this is important”* (24, f., entrepreneur); *“Probably, being socially active is important. But this is not about me”* (40, m., employee of a research institute); *“This is undeniably important. The question is what goals are set for social activity ... I have recently seen people who are socially active solely to popularise themselves. This does not appeal to me”*(36, m., head of the state corporation).

The reflection of informants about participation in socio-political life showed, on the whole, a low degree of such participation, as well as focus on more or less standard democratic procedures: elections, voting, petitions: *“I only go to the elections ... I regularly sign various petitions in the Internet against various unfair decisions [because I have] the need for change”* (40, m., research institute employee); *“I take part in the voting. Recently, I took part in a project to create a comfortable urban environment. As for, for example, the wording of some proposals ... I doubt the effectiveness of this. [Authorities] seem to be asking people, but in fact it turns out that they are not interested in this opinion”* (24, f., entrepreneur); *“I participate only in polls and elections ... [I do not take part in other socio-political initiatives] because of my natural inclinations. I just don’t really like to submit my opinion to a public court”* (41, f., leading specialist of an enterprise).

It is worth noting that in some cases, when social activity is still manifested, informants cannot interpret its subjective semantic value: *“I constantly participate in some kind of polls. I don’t know why (laughter) ... I don’t see anything wrong with spending three minutes filling out a questionnaire or answering by phone. I don’t know what benefit I have in doing this, but nevertheless, I do it”*(36, m., head of a state corporation).

Thus, all the proposed examples of social activity are exclusively participatory in nature: informants are inclined, sometimes without much reflection, to take part in already initiated activities, without expressing intentions to act as organisers of their own social projects.

As factors inhibiting the manifestation of social activity by informants, the authors single out the following:

1. Distrust of the system of public evaluation of authorities’ activities: *“I do not see that the proposals of citizens would be taken into account, implemented. After a visit to the tax inspector, they gave me a questionnaire to evaluate the quality of service, and part of the answers were already submitted for me in it”*(24, f., entrepreneur).

2. Bureaucratic barriers to this activity: *“It would be easier if you could participate in surveys and submit your proposals through electronic resources. Now the procedures are difficult: you have to go to the reception, stand in line”* (24, f., entrepreneur).

3. Lack of personal need and benefit in these types of activity: *“[It is important for me] if it gives to material gain, or if the solution of some issue will concern me personally ... I don’t care, for example, whose name is the airport or what is shown on the banknote”* (21, m., student with entrepreneurial experience); *“I consider myself a cautious*

person, and in order to be socially active, I need serious reasons. Just scream, to scream – what if they hear?! – I will never do that” (36, m., head of the state corporation).

In contrast to the position noted above, informants demonstrate activity in the implementation of their own life goals: “I am engaged in entrepreneurial activity, and I have plans to make it more ambitious. Now I am preparing to receive one more higher education for this” (24, f., entrepreneur); “For me, professional excellence is important, I strive for it ... I try to achieve, translate into reality any planned events, there is a goal setting for this” (68, f., university professor).

It is worth noting that, citing examples of initiative and independence in solving problems arising in the achievement of significant life goals, the vast majority of informants also suggested subjects related to the professional sphere: “The Sports Week was announced at school, it had to be filled with something ... I remembered that we have parents in the class who are successful in this. I called them ... made contact” (31, f., teacher); “At work, many problematic situations arise. I perceive them rather as tasks ... They can be planned for a month, and I try to solve them on time ”(36, m., head of the state corporation).

In some cases, the informant can even perceive the informant as a condition for feeling like a happy person: “I consider myself a happy person, [when] I have a lot of business ... When I have such a pace in my life, I manage to do it everywhere, both here and there, and with friends, and to work, and in university. It is important for me to be active ”(21, m., student with experience in entrepreneurial activity).

Most informants noted that they have a need for various activities other than professional. However, social activity is not included: “I learn to play the guitar, play sports” (24, f., entrepreneur); “I play volleyball, basketball, play table tennis. And another important part of my life is business trips to foreign countries” (40, m., research institute employee); “I do not do sports professionally, but I love yoga. Recently, I have been paying attention to various psychological trainings. And for brain training, I began to recall the English language”(41, f., leading specialist of an enterprise); “I can’t sit in one place for a long time, I need to put my energy somewhere, and after playing sports, my head and body as a whole work better. Reading is also already a habit” (21, m., student with entrepreneurial experience); “I have been doing ballroom dancing for many years, performing at competitions. Recently, my husband and I started going to the gym” (31, f., teacher).

The answers of informants to the question of how important it is for them to realise that labour activity benefits others (society) were formed in three clusters:

1. A cluster of “knowledgeable” workers (education and science) for whom the contribution to the development of society is inextricably linked with their own professional competencies: “I work in a field that is associated with what it calls work in the field of human capital formation. At the very beginning, this was spontaneous, but in process of self-determination in this area understanding of the significance and importance of this contribution increased”(68, f., university professor); “Scientific knowledge benefits society. And former students become part of the national economy and begin to pay taxes” (40, m., research institute employee); “It seems to me that I began to realise [the benefits of my work] only now, when other teachers began to praise my class. It gave me great pleasure” (31, f., teacher).

2. A cluster of professional specialists in state-owned corporations that pay more attention to the importance of their own professional activities for their inner circle — employees and colleagues in their own work collectives: “I think that [my work] is of some benefit. Together we control, ensure the safety of the process” (41, f., leading specialist of the enterprise); “There is an atmosphere of mutual assistance in our team, we are trying to help each other. Speaking more

broadly, about society, our state corporation fills the budget, and with this we benefit society” (36, m., head of the state corporation).

3. A cluster of entrepreneurs who deny the importance of the value component of their chosen professional activity: *“I don’t think so. And for me it is not very important. Although I have staff, so it turns out that I create jobs” (24, f., entrepreneur); “Most probably not. Frankly: in my work, the primary goal is money. Therefore, most likely, what I want to do, and what I will do, will be two different things. And the first in my life will be just to make money for the second” (21, m., a student with experience in entrepreneurial activity).*

Thus, it is possible to talk about a high degree of importance of an active life position for informants, but more concentrated around personal goals and objectives: professional activity, education and self-development, designing business and friendly relations, etc.

A comprehensive analysis of the informants' judgments within the framework of the second problem-thematic block revealed low self-identification with the inhabitants of the innovation territory: *“I think it is stupid to consider our region innovative” (40, m., research institute employee); “I always felt like a resident of a student, not an innovative city” (41, f., leading specialist of the enterprise); “I don’t feel that I live in an innovative region. And maybe one should not ascribe such statuses to the university city” (68, female, university professor); “I believe that in Russia, unfortunately, there are no innovative regions. We have come up with the term “innovation”, but we haven’t yet come up with what to do with it ”(36, m., head of the state corporation).*

To the question about the support of priority innovative development goals of the region, mostly negative answers were received. Arguing them, informants suggested a range of motivations:

1. Personal hostility to areas, lack of interest or ability: *“I have a personal hostility towards agriculture” (21, m., student with experience in entrepreneurial activity); “High-tech industries are not very close to me” (24, f., entrepreneur); “I do not support the development of production in the region where I live. As they say, it’s good that it was, but not in my backyard ”(36, m., head of the state corporation); “Entrepreneurship is for more motivated people. I decided that for me, self-employment is the best option ”(41, f., leading specialist of an enterprise).*

2. Lack/insufficiency of institutional conditions for implementation in these areas: *“My friend is engaged in agriculture. She says that government agencies are the last place where she will turn for help, for a grant. Because there is terrible reporting”(24, f., entrepreneur); “Both agriculture and business are very risky areas of activity in our country. It is possible that in other conditions, entrepreneurship would be interesting to me” (36, m., head of the state corporation).*

The study revealed psychographic features of the portrait of the modern middle class in the Russian region, motivating a subject to an active life position. The authors attribute to them:

- the desire for independence, as evidenced by the recognition of the priority of personal interests, the ability to independently achieve their goals and ensure their own well-being;
- orientation to self-realisation, registered both in the plane of economically active behaviour, and in the framework of other forms of activity (education and self-development, building family and friendships, health and sports, etc.).

With regard to social activity, a discrepancy between value attitudes and real behaviour has been recorded: despite the fact that the middle class recognises the importance of social activity for a modern person, they themselves demonstrate it to a small extent. The forms of manifestation of social activity are not numerous: participation in elections, voting and polls on public projects, signing petitions. The main conditions for increasing social participation are called both taking into account the opinion of the population on the part of the authorities, and the personal interest of a citizen himself.

The study revealed a relationship between awareness of the value of one's own work for society and the sphere of professional realisation. Thus, workers in the “knowledge” sector (education, science) have demonstrated a high degree of cognitive and emotional involvement in professional activities, which they assess as socially significant. For professional specialists in state-owned corporations, a value orientation towards the interests of a more local community — their own work collective — turned out to be characteristic. Entrepreneurs have recognised that it does not matter to them whether the activity benefits the community.

Noteworthy is the low reflexivity, which is accompanied by the social participation of the middle class. So, many informants found it difficult to determine the motives that prompt them to this kind of activity, in addition to circumstances external to the actor.

These observations are consistent with the conclusions of scientists formulated on the basis of sociological studies of the first decade of the 21st century on low quantitative indicators of the social activity of Russians (Potekhin, 2010; What has changed ...).

With regard to the Tomsk region, the results can be correlated with the conclusions of foreign scientists in the following aspect: researchers from other countries have found that middle-class representatives – employees of the public sector (teachers, doctors, scientists, employees of government bodies) – are loyal to the government and are not critical of the political perspective (Gerke, 2015). Since the city of Tomsk is a large university and scientific centre, there is also a large number of such representatives of the middle class.

If to consider the middle class as a driving force for the implementation of the overall development strategy, then this characteristic is weakly expressed. Most respondents do not support the strategic goals of the region. These goals are realised more as directions of activity of authorities, rather than citizens. These studies revealed the motives of the indicated distancing. In addition to professional rejection of certain types of activities, for example, agriculture, production, such obstacles and barriers were voiced: lack of faith in one's own abilities, lack of institutional conditions. Note that the latter circumstance was formulated in the form of a claim to the authorities, which, according to informants, are not able to create favourable conditions for the self-realisation of the population in such areas as high-tech industry, small and medium-sized businesses, and agricultural production.

IV. Conclusions

Summarise the revealed signs of a subjective middle class in the context of the characteristics of a post-industrial actor. The middle class of the Russian region is certainly active in realising personal goals that relate to a wide range of life activities: professional activity, education and self-development, sports and many other hobbies. Activity in its various manifestations acts for an actor even as a condition of happiness.

However, the majority of representatives of this social stratum in the selection of a qualitative study did not identify the need to solve social problems. There is a discrepancy of ideas and actions: recognising the importance of social activity, subjects themselves do not show such activity. Even if a person participates in any projects related to a broad public life, he does not fully realise the meaning and value of this participation.

Such a characteristic of the post-industrial middle class as the willingness to act as a driver of social development is not observed. Representatives of this stratum do not show interest in the strategic goals of the region and in most cases do not consider their activities as a contribution to the implementation of priority areas of overall development. Moreover, they do not even support these areas. Thus, one does not have to rely on the efforts of the middle class in the development of the territory, which allows one to doubt the reality of implementing such strategies.

As a result, the main conclusion of the study can be formulated as follows: the subjective middle class of the Russian region confidently determines its class affiliation, but in its characteristics does not fully reveal the features characteristic of the post-industrial period. A deficit is social activity. Based on the results of the study, the authors can offer some ways to solve this problem:

1. Regional development strategies should be developed and adjusted with the participation of a middle class.
2. Citizens can be motivated to participate in the public life by: 1) a report by authorities on how results of previous public discussions and proposals were converted into decision-making; 2) an explanation of how a topic under discussion affects personal interests of a citizen.
3. Manipulation of citizens' responses should be excluded.
4. In communications, electronic channels should be more widely involved. The official websites of the bodies of the State Medical University can become a reference platform, provided that additional efforts are made to promote them. Otherwise, such sites should be those Internet resources that are popular with citizens.

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