

## Role of Creative Social Practices in the Development of United Activities in Russian Society

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### ABSTRACT

The article reveals the role of creative social practices in the development of united activities in Russian society. Creative social practices in Russian society are implemented by different social groups and strata for the purpose of self-realization, participation in socially important affairs when agreed by state institutions, ensuring safety and stability, and developing social creativity. In modern Russian society, there is a requirement for social solidarity associated with the mutual responsibility of the elites and the public, community groups and the state.

### KEYWORDS

global challenges, united activities, state institutions

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## 1. Introduction

In the face of global challenges related to international terrorism, aggressive anti-Russian policy of certain political forces in the West, attempts to limit the national sovereignty of Russia and reduce its status as a regional power, it becomes important to understand the ability of Russian society not only to withstand external negative influences, being united in a negative mobilization mode, but also to ensure sustainable socio-economic and socio-political development of the country, overcoming the besieged-fortress feeling.

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It is evident that in order to understand the processes occurring under the current conditions in Russian society, it is necessary to understand and analyze the united activities, joint practices of society and the state aimed at the achievement of mutual understanding, mutual trust and shared responsibility in the fulfilment of national and social priority tasks. Discussions on the presence or absence of a civil society are based not on analytical model but on regulatory one, including such criteria as civil infrastructure (community organizations), the number of socially proactive citizens, the relationship between the two levels of civil society, the regulatory background of civil society functioning, the nature and the state of civil engagement.

Meanwhile, united activities involve the model of relations within society and with the state, which is based not on disputes about the way to be chosen to form a civil society: the initiative “from above”, from the government, or the “direct activity”, associations of citizens at the social micro level. When defining the united activities, it is clearly understood that civil society as a model of the relationship aimed at the harmonization of personal, group and state interests, does not determine the growth of social solidarity in society, because it reproduces the matrix of the “social contract”, which means that it is actually only possible to regulate the “reaching compromises” of the various interest groups.

For some time, it was assumed that the real activity is a protest, “Bolotnaya” one. Now there is a slow turn towards the understanding of civil activism as constructive and creative. Indeed, the strategic objectives of the Russian society development consist in the following: to achieve in the near future economic growth, and also to form a field of united activities, focused on the direct democracy institutions, social usefulness and significance of activity of the population, combining in equal measures the participation in the everyday practices and in public life. In other words, the point is that we shall not be focused on the formation of civil society “from above” as per Western standards.

In this regard, the Russian national specifics should be taken into account: specific forms of activity of Russian citizens, the ways various social strata and groups act in their own interests with account of the interests of society and the state. It should be also kept in mind that in Russia, the society solidarity is impossible without the state, which is regarded by the society not just as a “coercive machine”, but as a core of the society, representing a kind of national idea, a perfect image, endowed with its own unique characteristics, having absorbed a mentality and historical experience of the people (Nureev and Dementiev, 2006). We can say that the Russian society is state-centric; so it is logical to assume the dominance in Russian society of the activity related to the serving of group interests, contradicting the imperative of integrity and sovereignty.

Thus, civil engagement becomes inevitably transformed into united activities, including the social mutual understanding and social mutual responsibility of government and society. In this respect, destructive activity and focusing on the priority of interests of civil society, understood as a set of private associations,



restricting the competence of the state, are counter-indicative for Russian society. On the other hand, it should be taken into account that united activities do not abolish the civil activity, but just switch the focus of the activity of civil engagement structures from protests to dialogue between the authorities and society.

## 2. Methods

It is characteristic that the base stratum activity is associated with the phenomenon that can be interpreted as a healthy conservatism, as a relying on the values of order, stability and the rule of law. Therefore, protests on the part of the base stratum are an indicator of the unwillingness of the society and the state to put their demands in the political agenda, but it is noteworthy that attempts to use the conflict of interests by the “non-system opposition” are unsuccessful. This proves that the expectations of the base stratum are determined by axiological trust in the government and the desire to “be heard” in the society. Supposing that united activities reflect contradictory, but positive dynamics of the activity in Russian society, it should be noted that in comparison with the established image of civil engagement, united activities are not based on the dividing into “heroes” and “crowd”, their goal is to fulfill the potential of social utility and mutual support, which was typical for Russian society in the critical stages of development, but, unfortunately, became imperceptible in a period of stable development.

United activities in Russian society are certainly related to the socio-structural and institutional changes, the formation of new social groups and strata, and the functioning of democratic and market institutions. Russian society is socially inhomogeneous, a conflict pluralism of interest is manifested, and parallel social worlds have been formed with their own code of conduct, system of values and way of life. This situation seems to be undesirable, becoming an obstacle to the formation of a “good society”, a society in which political differences are minor in the context of the independent development of Russia, a new ideological scenario of formulation of a national idea unifying the Russians through the adoption of the ideas of humanism, solidarity and unity.

In this regard, it should be noted that the policy of civil society construction has a limited positive effect, since the copying of foreign realias can create an imitation of civil activity, without affecting the attitude of the base stratum of society, including both traditional social groups and strata, and newly formed ones (employees of industrial enterprises and agriculture companies, intellectuals employed in the public sector, representatives of small- and medium-sized businesses). This is manifested in the fact that the civil engagement structures, in the form in which they were formed in Russia, first of all, often set goals that fit the matrix of activities of civil structures in the West, but they do not correspond to the mass sentiments in Russian society. Second of all, most Russians are unfamiliar with the “professional activism”, the use of civil activism as a “business”, typical for the associations formed with the active support from the West.

Besides, civil engagement encouraging creates a situation of “activity inequality”, which means that there is differentiation of groups according to their activity, the potential impact on the social and political attitudes in the society and the type of relations with public and state institutions. There is a good reason for stereotypes of backwardness or advancement as per socio-professional and socio-territorial markers. Given the request for social solidarity related not with solidarity of compassion equality, but with a mutual responsibility of the elites and the public, community groups and the state, the united activities have the ability to adequately assess the changes that have taken place in the social life of the Russian society in recent years.

It is noteworthy that when assessing the changes, there has been a practically equal division of the Russians’ opinions (45% of respondents indicate a significant or a slight turn for the better, 43% hold opposite opinions) (Gorshkov et al., 2015). It would seem that the society is divided, which makes it difficult to identify a trend of social solidarity. However, the socio-diagnostic significance of this position of Russians is that the assessment of the situation in the country is determined not only by the dynamics of material conditions, but also by the influence of factor such as public security, public order and public safety. If the “negative” is based on the perception of the situation as critical or tense, and associated with the assessment of financial situation or the type of settlement, the positive perception of the situation in the country is determined by the influence of the presidency institute and Putin's activities. It is worth noting that, despite the growth of difficulties in everyday life, only 6% of Russians assess the situation as catastrophic (Gorshkov et al., 2015).

Patriotism of Russians, most clearly manifested in relation to the reunification of the Crimea with Russia, is traditional, based on the historical sense of attachment to the motherland and national pride for its achievements. According to a sociological survey conducted by “Levada-Center”, 88% of respondents are proud of the history of the country, 84% feel satisfied with sporting achievements, 77% rightfully believe that Russia is a country of world literature and art, and 74% of respondents pay great attention to the achievements of Russian science (Ogonek, 2015). We can state that for most Russians, the society in which they live, is creative, associated with the implementation of the talents of Russians, with their dramatic, but great history. This indicates a resource of historical memory of Russian society, the consensus regarding the assessments of the way made by the country, and contribution made by Russia in the development of world civilization.

This is important for the exemption from the syndrome of social and cultural trauma, for the recovery from the loss suffered by the country as a result of the collapse of the Soviet Union, the ambiguous consequences of socio-economic transformation in the post-Soviet period, the introduction into the Russian society of stereotypes of catch-up modernization and forcing the Russians to “learn from the civilized world”. Over the past decades, Russian society has made a transition to the new system of value coordinates associated with the recognition of Russian statehood, the acquisition of the Russian political



identity, with the understanding of the role of Russia in the global world. This situation can be considered as positive for the social consolidation of Russian society, for overcoming of a retrospective solidarism, related only to the positive assessment of past events and critical perception of contemporary realities.

Of course, we cannot deny the fact that Russians feel dissatisfaction and bitterness about social injustice (the pride is experienced by only 23% of Russians); only 27% of respondents assess the economic position of Russia as prestigious (Ogonek, 2015). United activities involve the transition from the socially critical and protest civil activity to social constructiveness and dialogue about the problems that can be regarded as unsolved or even untenable. Need for social justice is urgent in Russian society. Being deprived of social envy, egalitarian sentiment, this trend of mass consciousness expresses the ideal of social justice as an equality of opportunities. For Russian society, the legal equality and the equality before the law are determined by the social justice, by social relations based on the principle of social meritocracy, the assessment of the individual's achievements with account of professionalism, social utility and social mutual responsibility.

United activities are determined by the attitude toward the social justice, because they are initiated by the coordination of positions and actions of different social groups and sectors in relation to the unjust social inequalities as blocking social solidarity and dividing society at socio-domestic and political levels. Meanwhile, social solidarity is related to the formation of public associations that do not have the dominant political-party orientation and include people with different social and professional status, different worldviews, but aimed at ensuring sustainable social development of Russian society, improvement of the political system in the context of openness of the dialogue between the government and the society, and support of the policy of Russian statehood strengthening. Such public structures as the All-Russia People's Front, become the core of united activities, conductors of public influence on the activity of state institutions, promote the development of bottom social initiatives, and focus the Russian society's attention on the anti-corruption priorities, fight against red tape and poor quality of public administration.

As to the rate of united activities in Russian society, its manifestations can be seen in the combination of effective public policy and social initiative in various areas of public life: economic, law-making, law enforcement, interethnic, social and socio-environmental. In this sense, united activities are perceived positively by the majority of Russians at the regional level (38.6% of the Rostov region citizens believe that the possibilities to participate in public and political life have expanded for certain groups of people, and 16.8% believe that it is true for many people) (Volkov, 2012), and in Russia as a whole (53% of respondents). Thus, we can say that the public attitudes have shifted to the position of the approval of united activities. Despite the differences in the choices of social activity forms, there is a desire to participate in new social practices related to the interests of the individual and the State, specific actions that make it possible to join the socially useful activity; "Protesters" who consider social

activity only in opposition to the Russian state and government are only 5% (Gorshkov et al., 2015).

### 3. Results

Civil society is aimed at limiting the role of the state, at creation of a position of control in order to prevent government intervention in the private sphere. And, thus, the principle of “rational egoism” gets established, involving public relation regulation in the framework of the “fair” competition. Russian society is in the situation that requires a different approach. This is reflected in the fact that the cultivation of civil activity focused on the scope of individual rights, development of democracy, is perceived as a necessary, but not paramount condition for positive social change. The statements declaring that the Russian society’s civil engagement is weak because of the underdeveloped tradition of civil liability, that Russians feel themselves unable to influence the social life processes, that the state is not interested in the activity of the population, do not look indisputable.

While 36% of Russians feel anxiety (Gorshkov et al., 2015) and experience financial problems, society is concerned about the state of social consolidation: the fact that the moral state of society is assessed as unsatisfactory indicates a real movement toward the overcoming of the feeling of social apathy, mistrust and loneliness. Given that fact that the introduction of anti-Russian sanctions did not eventually lead to the division of society into “losers” and “people staying afloat” (62% of Russians believed that sanctions would affect the broad layers of population) (Gorshkov et al., 2015), disturbing factor for the society is the degree of mutual support and mutual aid. Opinion polls show that the society demonstrates a relatively high level of political apathy (29% are not interested in politics and only 2% participate in political activities) (Gorshkov et al., 2015).

This attitude of Russians is due to the fact that political activities, as well as political parties, are assessed in the category of background, related to the electoral activity, while the criterion of social solidarity is not common ideological worldview, but social empathy and social altruism.

For Russians, the political sphere is perceived as a sphere of implementation of the “will of the people”, the approval of its sovereignty through the activities of the President and other government institutions. This is the difference between solidarity and civil activity, which is traditionally based on heavy-handed influence, on the support of political parties, not state institutions. We can say that the state of united activities in Russian society is characterized by the transition to the future planning, to the expansion of the positive scenario of the Russia's development. The people start realizing that the most valuable resource of Russian society is the human one, creative class, combining businessmen, intellectuals, skilled workers and government employees.



Moreover, the creative class updates advanced network technologies and often acts in accordance with the logic alternative to traditional political institutions, implementing the communicative aspect of democracy (Gorshkov et al., 2015). Undoubtedly, the sociological understanding of the socio-political processes in Russian society requires the development of new models of governance and humanistic ways of social interaction. Russian creative class objectively purports to approve social and cultural patterns of united activities, as in the framework of professional self-realization and participation in social initiatives it increases the possibility of Russia's recovery from the crisis.

Indeed, the Russian society is a society of unused opportunities, and social attitudes tend to move from survival strategies or enrichment ones to the development model (Volkov, 2013). This implies united activities, as it is impossible to achieve the desired goal in the framework of worsening social ruptures and inequalities, selfish group interests and irresponsible individualism. This statement leads to the conclusion that the creative class is an attractor of united activities and contributes to social shifts at the level of mental and social practices. It should be emphasized that for the creative class it is unwise and unproductive to oppose the Russians in political, social and cultural terms. The main thing is to get most people involved in common social practices in order to provide benefit as per their socio-professional capacities.

If we take into account the fact that in the public mind there is no polarization into “us” and “them”, then the Russian society can be considered as a society capable to overcome the social fragmentation, social atomization on the way of consolidation of united activities: it is characteristic that only 18% of Russians see in the political activity the possibility to communicate with people, when willingness to participate in specific cases and use the opportunity to contribute to the public success is felt by only 11% (Gorshkov et al., 2015).

It can be assumed that most of people are interested in alternative social engagement, joint practices of various groups of population, aimed at the implementation of mutual responsibility of society and the state. This trend can be emphasized due to the fact that the dynamics of participation in organized social structures is markedly inferior to the movements of initiative citizens at the social micro level: this is probably because non-governmental organizations are focused on traditional forms of civil and political engagement (especially, human rights groups). For the socially initiative citizens participating in small informal structures it is important to establish cooperation with the different levels of administration (municipal, regional). This means the overcoming of a sense of political apathy, or rather, the end of playing the role of political “bit players”, there is a dialogue between citizens and the government, reducing simulated interaction. The idea is that a simulated person cannot take seriously, examine the problematics neither discuss any real issue (Volkov, 2013).

It is worth noting that the Russian experience shows unproductivity of citizen involvement in organized actions, if this does not imply the participation in real affairs, which may be useful for the society. In other words, the common engagement rejects deliberate distancing from the social practices and is aimed



at the bearing of the mutual responsibility of government and society. Russians take seriously the understanding by the government of everyday problems, and consider it as a criterion of concern for the citizens. In any case, the most motivated form of engagement is represented by the local government, condominium partnership and Internet communities. Given that 77% of Russians do not participate in any organizations, associations and communities, we are not talking about social anarchism, about the fundamental deviation from the organizing and self-organizing (Gorshkov et al., 2015).

We can say that the idea of organized public engagement at the individual level is not popular in Russian society, as the mass consciousness of Russians is still under the effect of institutional distrust: according to the polls, the social structures have not formed a communicative space, they do not provide possibilities for the social self-realization and social altruism, do not cultivate a feeling of social understanding and mutual support. When dealing with the authorities, there is a situation of direct contact, and the rule of realizable expectations is effective.

The matter is not just in the fact that social engagement cannot be carried out in an “air-free space” and requires the use of financial and administrative resources (Gorshkov et al., 2015). It is also important that the contact with the authorities, with the State is seen by different population groups as an evidence of social influence, social presence. In this regard, the power structure are an objective mediator of mutual attraction of social strata and groups which do not interact with each other in the context of parallel social worlds, lifestyles, codes of behavior and views of life.

It is obvious that in these conditions, there is an unaccomplished desire to achieve a social consensus separated from the state influence in Russian society. As we can see through the example of events significant for the history of modern Russia (reunification with the Crimea, the fight against international terrorism), social solidarity is symbolic, connected to the cultural and historical context, to a tradition of statehood. This does not contradict with social creativity, joint social practices forming the social understanding and mutual responsibility. It is necessary to proceed from the fact that the greatest activity potential is shown by the groups leading to new forms of social engagement due to the social consequences of their activity (Volkov, 2011). The idea is that the Russians interested in social self-realization and social altruism, and willing to participate in socially useful initiatives and projects, are sharing the position of social legitimation, recognition by public institutions consolidating various areas of public initiative and self-organization.

Not surprisingly, in Russian society, the social activity is weakly related to the protest activities, with opposition to the state and attempts to form parallel administrative structures. It can be stated that for most Russians protest activity is evaluated not only in terms of its low social efficiency, but it also associated to the destructive implications for social and political stability, especially in today's challenging geopolitical situation. Assuming that social creativity needs the paradigm of cooperation, harmonization, personal and





public safety (Volkov, 2013), it should be emphasized that the priority activities in Russian society are those aimed at the achievement of the common good. This means that in joint practices, the attention is paid on the loyalty to the state and the absence of claims regarding the group exclusivity and group monopoly in the context of social solidarity achievement.

It should be also noted that the pursuance of united activities as a positive form of social engagement, although is associated with a sense of patriotism and a readiness for self-restrictions, it has social and projective orientation. This is a very important factor that should be considered when monitoring public opinion about the implications of Russia's external challenges in an effort to raise its status in the international arena. Conspicuous is the fact that in the graduation of confidence in the state and public institutions, the absolute lead is taken by the President of Russia (78%), the Russian government (56%), churches (50%), and regional authorities (49%) (Gorshkov et al., 2015). There is the tendency to get united around the institutions of order and stability, having the highest reputation (symbolic) capital in Russian society. In other words, Russians' united activities are based on the sense of belonging to an alliance with the state, rather than with civil associations pursuing private (particularistic) interests.

An analysis of institutional trust structure shows that the greatest confidence is in the institutions that embody the potency, great power statehood and institutional unity rather than in structures designed to protect the rights and freedoms of citizens (Gorshkov et al., 2015), which provides evidence of not only the dissatisfaction of Russians with activities of these structures or civil society weakness: it can be stated that the institutions of order embody the idea of "solidarity" that in a society experiencing a deficit of social understanding, is associated with the achievement of agreement on the main objectives and priorities of development, regardless of the influence of time. We can say that even if Russians have not fallen into disenchantment with civil engagement opportunities, they recognize alternative in the form of social engagement based on an open dialogue with the "nuclear" state institutions.

Russian society tends to consider united activities as the optimal form of social engagement based on the principle of opportunity equality through common social practices and interactions on this basis with state institutions being not only symbolic but also granting the request of Russian society for social consolidation. In the context of the above, it is important to note that 66% of respondents in the Rostov region (and this figure is close to the all-Russian one) agree with the statement that the Russian society needs stability more than changes (Volkov, 2014). It can be concluded that attitudes of Russians are dominated by balanced conservatism, based on the understanding of changes as planned, predictable, having socio-creative effect as a result of mutual understanding and mutual responsibility of society and the state.

United activities of Russians are thus associated with the willingness to carry out socially beneficial activities in the context of building of their own lives and the impact on government decision-making and on the functioning of public

institutions in general. It can be said that a high level of confidence in the institutions of order acquires not only symbolic but also practical and social significance. Of course, we cannot ignore the fact that the development institutions related to the civil activity do not perform, according to Russians, the important function of the life building, do not promote the use of democratic instruments to strengthen the social solidarity in Russian society. This is due to the fact that the democratic institutions have formal legal accentuation, while, judging by the results of opinion polls, the Russian society determines the priority of justice and rationality: without giving up the achievements of democracy, Russians reject the possibility to use democratic institutions to manipulate the public consciousness, to sow discord within society regarding the assessment of the Russian history, culture and development of Russian statehood.

United activities are characterized as an alternative to civil activity, interpreted as a focus of efforts to protect the personal and group interests in taking the state as a guarantor of rights and freedoms, and at the same time as a potentially destructive force, limiting citizens' activity. Due to this fact, 83% of respondents in the Rostov region share the opinion that the current government, with all its shortcomings, deserves to be supported (Volkov, 2014). The idea is that in Russian society there is an evident difference between the activity aimed at satisfying social and political ambitions at the expense of national unity and social practices in which loyalty to the state is accompanied by the expectation to be “heard”, thus contributing to the working of government institutions in the public interests, rather than in those of individual groups.

Meanwhile, it should be taken into account that the united activities have not become a socially significant behavioral phenomenon, Russian society is still experiencing the effect of uniting on the basis of negative mobilization, and social initiatives could degenerate into social imitation. These circumstances can be called obstacles to the inclusion of society in the process of social cohesion. At the same time, the analysis of social attitudes shows the possibilities of united activities, if there is a dialogue between the elites and society, and if community organizations, churches and public institutions get involved in this process. This condition creates a launch pad for united activities, but the main factor is the transition of bottom citizens' initiative to the new social quality: achieving social consensus regarding the implementation of social creativity, which is not only an alternative to social anarchy, violence, hatred and prejudice (Volkov, 2013), but focuses socially active groups on an entry into a common social space, on real assistance to reforms designed to improve the lives of Russian citizens and raise the status of Russian statehood.

United activities are “double-natured”: on the one hand, their vector is aimed at social altruism, participation in socially useful activities; on the other hand it is aimed at interaction with the public institutions, which not only ensure the provision of administrative, legal and financial resources, but also stimulate the involvement of citizens in various social practices. In no small measure this is related to the formation in Russian society of the creative class, including groups



focused on social creativity, joint practices in the implementation of projects of different size and different level.

The consideration of an active individual as focused solely on the self-sustaining initiative and proactiveness becomes a thing of the past. We are not saying the Russian society comes back to a mass social paternalism. The development of the creative class shows that there is a formation of a new type of social activity focused on a stable life stance, related to the recognition of personal success in correlation with the impact on public interests. We will note that the ideas of social justice and rationality unite Russians in the context of both the desired future of Russia, and the social activity, content of which depends on the possibilities of social expression on the basis of a stable social order, sustainable social development and consolidation of national dignity and national pride of Russians.

#### 4. Conclusion

Thus, we can say that united activities show a tendency of transition of the public conscience from the individualistic activity focused on cultivation and introduction of conflict pluralism in social interactions, to a model of the activity aimed at the implementation of the dialogue between different groups through the mediation of the state as a guarantor of unity and stability of Russian society. There is no doubt that the domestic sociological thought has to consider a new social phenomenon, avoiding endless discussions about the absence or the development of civil society in Russia, statements about low level of social cohesion Russians and justification of normative model of building a civil society in Russia. Without denying the need for research related to civil activity perspectives, we can talk about the urgency of the diagnosing of united activities, focusing ambiguous processes such as the level of institutional trust of Russians, value-regulatory dynamics, images of new challenges and threats. In general, the impact of united activities increases in Russian society, if it is introduced into the public discourse and becomes a subject of serious expert discussion and assessment. To achieve such a state of society we need nothing more or less than: to refresh the potential of the creative class capable to participate in the implementation of a positive scenario for Russia's future, and strengthen the Russians' assurance that state institutions in their management activities reflect the trust in the Russian state as a guarantor of rights, well-being and security of the Russian people.

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